

KEN NORRIS / Bowering's Books

Long before I ever met George Bowering I corresponded with him. I was still living in New York, playing in a new wave band called Bogart, but my career in music was winding down. I'd pretty much decided to return to Canada and, with friends, had decided to start a magazine called *CrossCountry*, which was going to be a little magazine of Canadian and US poetry. Had I read any of Bowering's books yet? I don't think so. Somehow his name came up and I wound up sending him a letter soliciting poems. He sent poems. As I remember it, some of those wound up three years later in *The Concrete Island*, a book I would co-edit for Vehicule Press. But that comes later in the story.

I don't think I was reading George when I was still living in New York. I was reading Margaret Atwood, and I was also selling her at The New Yorker Bookshop on 89th and Broadway, where I was working my day job under the tutelage of the wonderfully eccentric bookseller Peter Martin.

No, I started reading George in the spring of 1975, once I was back living in Montreal, hanging around the gallery Vehicule Art, and getting to know the Vehicule Poets. My first book, *Vegetables*, was published in March by the fledgling Vehicule Press. Now I was a published author and a magazine editor and I was all of twenty-four years old. Since I was now a Canadian author it was time for me to start reading some Canadian poetry. Artie Gold turned me on to my first George Bowering book. And that book was *Curious*.

Curious

Artie Gold had an amazing library. I still have dreams about it. It contained every hip book of poetry you would ever want to read. He had no Robert Frost, Richard Wilbur, or Robert Penn Warren. But he had first editions of Jack Spicer, and Frank O'Hara, and Barbara Guest, and Gregory Corso, and maybe even Francois Villon. He had Canadian poetry—not a lot of it, just the good stuff. And he had every George Bowering book.

I think I was allowed to look through *Points On The Grid* if I was sitting in Artie's study. But he wouldn't lend it to me, on the basis of too many bad experiences. I

don't think he would even lend me *Curious*. But he took me to The Double Hook where I could buy a copy of my own and start my own library.

But I first saw *Curious* in the context of its being in Artie's library, and its being at the time, I believe, the latest George Bowering book. It was the new one, and it was certainly...curious. I remember being intrigued by it.

Here I was, getting to know this poet (Artie), who knew all these poets and had all of these poetry books. Bowering had been his teacher, introducing him to all of these poets and poems, and here was this curious book, written in what seemed to me (at the time anyway) odd prose lines, all about these poets, mostly American and Canadian, most of them living, who I would try to corral for my magazine of Canadian-US poetry.

"He was coming down the stairs..." I don't remember if that is actually how *Curious* begins, and I will have to check, but that's how I remember the book beginning: with the large, looming presence of Charles Olson. And later on bpNichol is playing ping pong. So much of my future life is contained in that book, the roots I was searching for and the older brothers and sisters in poetry that I was longing for. And I was first encountering it in the study of the person who would become my best friend in poetry for the next thirty-two years.

So I paged through *Curious* in Artie's library, and we probably both decided that it was a book that I needed to have, so off we went to the bookstore to buy me a copy. I read it much more closely once it was a book I owned, and it started up the double relationship I was to have with George's work and with Coach House Press. Because it was one of those books that was magic, and my desire for a Coach House book of my own started with reading *Curious*.

Genève

I have read *Genève* maybe ten times. I don't think I have ever understood it. But that really doesn't matter. For me, as a young poet, it was an important energy field. Never mind that you could take the dust jacket off, open it up, and there was the sequence of the Tarot cards as they were drawn.

George certainly introduced me to the world of strange initiatives in poetry. Interesting strategies for writing book-length poems or serial poems. *Curious* was a serial poem. It was also a collection of portraits or were they experiences? More experiences involving poets than portraits. Against still life. Everything was moving, something was certainly happening. Interactions. Fields of energy.

I am pretty sure that I bought my copy of *Genève* at The Word. The Double Hook was where you went for new books, and The Word was where you went for used, though they had new Montreal poetry books too. But *Genève* was another one of those Coach House books, and who WERE these guys anyway, and why and how were they making all of these fabulous books?

Genève comes tied to *Curious* in my mind, but it also comes tied to Frank Davey's *Arcana*, another Coach House book, another Tarot card book. I remember at the time that I actually liked *Arcana* more, liked the poems more, thought the book went deeper. Was I right? Who knows? I was twenty-four years old.

So I never quite "got" *Genève*. Nevertheless, there were so many reasons to love it. The cover, the paper, the press, the mysticism, the methodology. It's almost like the poems came last in my shaky hierarchy of what mattered to me about the book. It was THE BOOK that mattered, everything the book was doing, all of the ways it moved out into the traditions of composition and imagining and unfolding. It completely sold me on the serial poem as a way to do things. Names pinned some things down in *Curious*. In *Genève* everything floated.

The Concrete Island

I wish I could remember the first time I met George. I remember him reading from *A Short Sad Book* at McGill in 1976. I remember my girlfriend sitting on his lap at Vehicule Art in 1977. I remember sleeping on his couch in Kerrisdale in 1982. I remember him trying to cheer me up at a reading in Toronto when I was getting divorced in 1994. I remember he and I and Frank walking back to our hotel after a Talon reading in Calgary in 2010. But I don't remember the first time I met him.

It was probably at a reading at Vehicule Art that he gave, maybe in 1975. That is the most likely scenario. Because a lot of things were going on in 1975.

One of the things that was going on in 1975 was that Vehicule Press was getting ambitious and putting together an editorial board.

Simon Dardick and Guy Lavoie decided it was time to get serious and to start going after Canada Council funding, under the Project Grant umbrella. So we needed a manuscript that would secure funding. Artie wrote a letter to George Bowering.

George wrote back saying that he had two manuscripts, and we could have the one of our choosing. The first was called *Poem And Other Baseballs*. The second was

called *The Concrete Island: Montreal Poems 1967-1971*. After some discussion, the editors decided to ask George to send along *The Concrete Island*.

George has written somewhere that his years in Montreal were his “symphonic period.” I think *Autobiology* was written in Montreal. *Genève* was written in Montreal. At least part of *Curious* was written in Montreal.

The Concrete Island was the “other” George Bowering. The guy who wrote little and not so little lyrics. Most of the poems in this manuscript were little lyrics. A couple of them had even appeared in *CrossCountry* Issue #1.

Anyone who has read a lot of Bowering knows that it is pretty easy to spot what is a primary text and what is a secondary text. *The Concrete Island* was a secondary text. There were a half-dozen really good poems and then a lot of fooling around. It was an interesting way to cut our teeth as editors. We asked George to take out a few poems that were either dreadful or inappropriate, and then we packaged it up and sent it off to the Canada Council, fingers crossed. It was a second tier manuscript by a first rate author: would they fund it?

They did. Vehicule Press was in business.

In hindsight, *Poem and Other Baseballs* would have been the better choice. It was the better book. I have read it quite a few times. *The Concrete Island*: not so much. But it was Montreal-based, and maybe it helped to make the case for Vehicule Press as a fundable regional press at the time.

A Short Sad Book

I was born and raised in the United States. Everything I know about Canadian history I learned from *A Short Sad Book*. That is maybe not such a good thing.

Memory is faulty, but I remember having a really interesting relationship with this text. I experienced it in three ways: I heard it read out loud, I read it in installments, and then I read it as a book.

As I remember it, I heard George read from *A Short Sad Book* at three different readings, as he was writing it. I also read it as it was published in installments in Fawcett’s *NMFG*. Then I bought a copy and read it when it was published by Talonbooks in 1977.

In a funny way, listening to George read from *A Short Sad Book* was an interesting way of getting educated in Canada. There were all the references. There was his Western sense of humour. There was the homage to Stein. There was all

the xenophobia about “the Black Mountain Influence” that was being skewered. He was telling me a lot about the country I was living in. He was telling me a lot about the country I would eventually choose to call my own.

It seemed very Canadian. And that seemed to me like a real accomplishment.

I liked the fact that it was all being written by hand in notebooks. Four years later I started writing all of my books by hand in notebooks and I haven’t stopped yet.

I haven’t read *A Short Sad Book* again since the early eighties, so a lot of it is echoes for me now. Every now and again some line from it will pop into my head, and I will wonder for twenty minutes where that line is from, and then I’ll know.

Kerrisdale Elegies

Allophanes is a book I wish I could understand. *Kerrisdale Elegies* is a book I wish I had written.

Years after reading *Kerrisdale Elegies* I sat down and read *Duino Elegies*. I didn’t much care for them, particularly all that stuff about dolls and acrobats. I would take Lorca and Neruda over Rilke any day of the week. With Lorca, I like reading Lorca and I like reading *After Lorca*. With Neruda I like reading Neruda and I like translating or adapting Neruda. With Rilke, I don’t much care for *Duino Elegies* but I love George’s *Kerrisdale Elegies*. Perhaps mostly because Bowering’s shifts in tone make everything much more palatable and human. *Kerrisdale Elegies* is a fabulous postmodern correction of everything that was wrong with Rilke. It isn’t just the academic translation of Rilke that is stilted. There is something stilted about the poetic sensibility as well. Of course, I don’t read German. I am having to trust my translators to understand what it is that they are trying to translate.

Bowering doesn’t translate. He adapts and shifts. He pours Rilke through his own sensibility and comes up with something that is more inherently satisfying. He utilizes Rilke to tap into his own Romanticism. Bowering is a poet who loves Shelley, and has more than a little of Shelley in him. Modernism can become the crossroads between Romanticism and Postmodernism, or the place where the two meet, negotiate and reconcile.

I find reading *Kerrisdale Elegies* to be remarkably satisfying. Ironically, perhaps, Bowering’s most original poetry is work that he adapts. In this, he is not unlike Spicer.

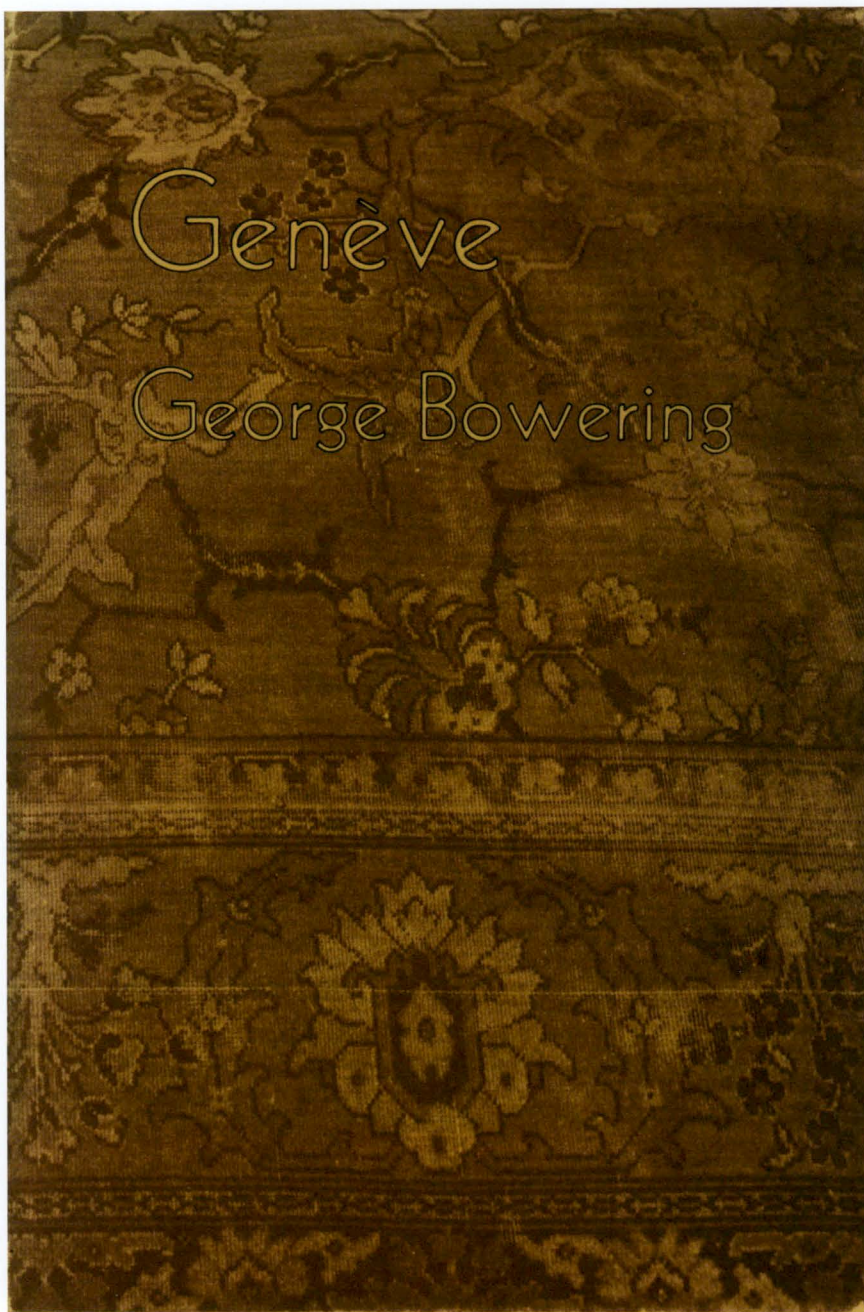


George in his book-lined office at Sir George Williams University, Montreal, 1968.
Photo credit: Stan Hoffman





The dust jacket of *Genève* (Toronto: Coach House, 1971) unfolds to reveal a spread of Tarot cards arranged from the centre out in the order GB turned them up as he wrote the poems.



Genève (Toronto: Coach House, 1971)

The cover features a detail from the carpet at Coach House Books in the 1970s.
Photo credit: Stan Bevington