



Autobiology
George Bowering



Autobiology (Vancouver: Georgia Straight Writing Supplement, Vancouver Series #7, 1972); front and back covers.

CARL PETERS / George Bowering's *Autobiology*: A Boat

"We're nowhere else yet."

—M.A.C. Farrant, *The World Afloat*

If you wanted to write the "autobiography" of George Bowering, and be rather experimental or playful about it, you could cite the first sentence from each paragraph in his chapter "Autobiology" published in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Bowering's autobiography would read and sound like this:

I lived in Montreal from 1967 till 1971.

But still my attentions were elsewhere. (41)

And like a lot of her faithful readers, I imitated [Gertrude Stein].

Yeats got his metaphors from creatures in his wife's dreams, of course, but he knew that he was one of many co-workers in the great task of poetry. (42)

Naturally.

It's not hard to figure out which writers I have derived from over the years. (43)

Memory is generative. The act of remembering produces another story. *Autobiology* is "anecdotal," but the stories are true in the sense that they are firmly grounded in linguistic and literary etymology; in *Autobiology*, etymology is image (the thing in place).

Autobiology composes a self but it more significantly announces the presence of the whole body inside and outside of language; in other words, the book takes "self" to be self-evident. In 1972, anticipating the semiotic challenges posed by the "identity writers," the book goes far beyond identity politics. Today, the dominant delivery systems (digital and information technologies—from universities to blogs) allow the vanguard to do anything it wants. Bowering discovers for himself techniques coming out of hand-eye skills such as those we see in Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Marcel Duchamp, among others:

The word from my hand follows
the release of my eye from the
dream of my release from the ground

but just. Growing up is knowing
all the evils of the world & fail
ings of all people

will not be corrected before the
end of my life. (*Autobiology* 18)

Postmodernism can be said to eliminate historical consciousness, the individual, and the creative process to the extent that it eliminates memory. Bowering's writing puts memory back into the present, "writing writing."

Memory also fractures. But a poet like Bowering puts memory back into the continuous present by making it into *writing writing*; hence, he pushes tradition (in Eliot's sense and in Duncan's sense) further. Like the derivative, memory "derives." Memories, like photographs, are not static images. They spin. "[Everything moves; nothing is still; everything passes away; nothing lasts.] I like this sort of thing a lot better than describing a room, say," Bowering writes in *Harry's Fragments*. This is why the photograph of Bowering as a child with his mother on the front cover of *Autobiology* is printed vertically; however, the photograph of the author with his daughter on the back cover is printed horizontally. One must turn the book in order to read it. Bowering's writing embraces this turning and returning; *Autobiology* is also the text from which other "Bowering" texts derive ("writing writing"), even though it originally derives from Gertrude Stein. That is interesting. "Tradition" is both enacted and engaged.

Put another way congruent with Bowering's poetics of intelligent attention, memory "composes." Hence, in a more recent poem, "*from West Side Haiku*":

Fred thinks his memory
 beats mine just because it's
more like what happened. (175)

Stein reminds us that memory destroys creation. Bowering's praxis eschews the self, as well, and foregrounds the notion that significant art needs the private, intimate self. What that is, is anyone's guess; suffice it to say: "LOVE is FORM / intimacy is the loveliest / part of thought" (Blaser 16). "This has nothing to do with self-expression," as Calvin Tomkins asserts, "and everything to do with the

discovery of personal integrity, an integrity that [comes] from dealing honestly with materials, and that [can] be translated into dealing honestly with one's fellow creature/creator" (25-26).

In *Autobiology*, we catch a glimpse of the real: "The word from my hand follows / the release of my eye" (18). The passage foregrounds an ethical ("but just") imperative, one that cannot be separated or divorced from being "in" a body: "release." The word is mentioned twice in the first three lines of this chapter and that is important. "I believe," writes Bowering, "that the human intellect is the closest thing we have to the divine. It is the way we can join one another in spirit" ("The Holy Life"). Bowering: "I was two, I was three, I was nearly four" (18). Counting is a precise act of mind and each number, preceded by the past tense "I was," marks change; the additive act of counting is also a counting down—a preparation—a call to action and attention. And the numbers may also signify voices—voices deriving from elsewhere or out there, as they do in Stein's portrait of Picasso:

One.
I land.
Two.
I land.
Three.
The land.
Three....¹ ("If I Told Him" 192-93)

If the intellect is the closest thing we have to the divine then our failings and imperfections are the closest things we have to each other; in *Autobiology*, error reminds us of the other:

I conceived my love for nature
when I burned the hillside & this I
did before I began school....

The name of the town was
Greenwood & the war was on, where

¹ "One / I land" points to "Two" and also *to*; the repetition of "three" rimes with and thus relates to *see* and *free* "The land." As with Bowering's text, the I is released.

cities burned in their cement.
What held the hill together beneath
the flames I did not know but I
learned love for it & saw those men
joined to the hill & my shame. (20-21)

Into chaos, burning, and history, but the language is also on fire illuminating the word as image. We name and thus we know. Or, “consciousness is how it is composed” (*Autobiology* 38).

The name
of the town was Greenwood & when I
returned a few years later the hill
was green. I feared...

I ran home & waited for the
punishing hand...
It never came & when I went back
a few years later the hill was
covered with green wood while the
nearby hills were brown & the war
was over, & I loved it. (20-21)

Bowering follows in the tradition of his predecessor Sheila Watson; their texts do not describe; they depict and their method of depiction derives from Stein and Cubism, which Watson thoroughly understands.²

George Bowering is a derivative (“re-combinative”) poet—he states as much in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. In this text he cites the poet Robert Duncan on tradition—that a poet learns his or her craft from other poets; thus, Duncan

2 “[If] I wanted to use the gestalt way of explaining the work of art, I would say that what I was concerned with was figures in a ground, from which they could not be separated. I didn’t think of them as people in a place, in a stage set, in a place which had to be described for itself, as it existed outside the interaction of the people with the objects, with the things, with the other existences with which they came in contact. So that the people are entwined in, they’re interacting with the landscape, the things about them, the other things which exist” (Watson 15).

writes a book derivative of Gertrude Stein; and Bowering writes a book derivative of Robert Duncan writing about Gertrude Stein *writing* about Gertrude Stein. This technê is more than mere imitation and mannerism and closer to a certain asceticism that defines the very best modern works. By “derivative” Duncan is referring to the *modern* writer. As Bowering points out:

It was a negative word because poetry teachers were always going on about being “original,” as if that were (a) positive and/or (b) possible. “Original” goes with “creative” and “unique” in some debased creative writerly jargon. We are also here remembering Yeats, who said something like “speak to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage.”

That is to say (a) there are muses, and (b) poetry is a job that we, if we are serious, are in together. We continue the work.

The same third-rate newspaper reviewers who complained that the poet was “not in control of his materials” would say, “he’s imitating Gertrude Stein.” As if Gertrude Stein’s decades of work were useless because no one should learn from her and carry on her work. When Pound said “Make it New” he was talking about the tradition, keeping it awake. Those moribund Victorian rimesters he did not like were not deriving from Shelley and Coleridge. They were leaning on them. (Email to the author)

Autobiology’s chapter 6, “THE VERANDAH,” derives as much from Williams—see “The Dance” below—as it does from Stein. Bowering’s proprioceptive performance gestures towards the cinematographic guiding readers to listen with their eyes:³

In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, [...] Kicking and rolling
about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
shanks must be sound to bear up under such
rollicking measures, prance as they dance
in Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess. (147)

3 I cannot resist the pun embedded in *Vermeer’s Light* (Vermear’s Light).

In works of art that are modern we simultaneously confront or engage synchronic and diachronic time. What we experience is closer to the synchronic sense (the time “in” the composition) while what we recall or remember is diachronic (the time “of” the composition). “THE VERANDAH,” like Williams’s poem, conjoins the two time-senses into one “continuous” reel or loop, bringing both into a singular perception or focus. The two senses of time defined by Stein and improvised in Bowering’s autobiographical *message*, are summarized by Charles Olson:

The message is

a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time

is the birth of the air, is
the birth of water, is
a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of
another fetid nest

is change, presents
no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it,
when it is pressed together and condensed,
loses it

This very thing you are (“The Kingfishers” 9-10)

Modern poetry is an art of perceiving movement. “Sometimes when you are listening to a great jazz musician performing a long solo,” Bowering suggests, “you are experiencing his mind, moment by moment, as it shifts and decides, as it adds and reminds.... You are in there, where that other mind is. His mind is coming through your ears and inside your mind” (“The Holy Life”). “THE VERANDAH” is a continuous line drawing the continuous present, at least prolonging it in other (and the same) words—this chapter is all one sentence.

Some poets fancy themselves archaeologists, mining what they write. Bowering reads. He is anti-archaeological, anti-absorptive.⁴ Others may engage the creation of art as a critical practice—that is postmodernism—but the point I am making is that George Bowering *reads*. He is the “author” (creator) of a world rooted in a poetics of reading as labour, as love; that is his singular (outstanding) contribution to literature and art.

I imagine that *Autobiology* is one of the most difficult books for George Bowering to revisit and re-read. Bowering is saying what Eliot is saying when he quotes Yeats: “Speak to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage.” Each chapter in *Autobiology* is about the deep struggles with history and the history of art.

The book is framed by two photographs and prefaced with a discontinuous line drawing of the photograph on the front cover. This paradigm shift transforms the image; the image disappears and the writing begins.

A photograph is another kind of derivation. The experience of the object shown in a photograph is shadowed by the object that is represented in the photograph and that is one kind of loss; however, the loss of the place where it inhabited the world, and the person with whom we experience our sense of loss and recovery, is the entire context in which that loss is figured; and if the art or photograph is genuine then the context comes alive as in a painting by an artist who discovers more than the eye can see.⁵

A photograph can do that, too, but the material means are different. It is a matter always of negotiating the real.

Derive means of the river, and though we may not step into the same river twice (hence cannot copy) we can continue to dip (imitate), and Stein has not come to an end. You might attend to WCW’s key distinction between imitation and copying. Derivation is akin to imitation. My poems are not Stein copies.

What is the boat, eh? (Bowering, “Email to the author”)

4 See Charles Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption” in *A Poetics*.

5 See *Autobiology* 38-39.

The last sentence of *Autobiology* reads “What is the boat” and it is self-referential (107). “What is the boat, eh?” The boat, à la Gertrude Stein, is, “but just.” Placing “a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence” (Merleau-Ponty 203). It is the place.

Autobiology and its composition is about afterwardness and aftermathness, remembering where we stepped and the transitional world that needs other worlds for anchoring memory from time to time on that river. And yet, “We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards. We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but” (“The Mother of Us All” 87).

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