

STEVE MCCAFFERY / *Snowballs in Hells: George Bowering's Αλλοφανες*

Allophanes begins with a citation, claimed to be dictated to the author by the deceased poet Jack Spicer: "It began with a sentence heard in the author's head: The snowball appears in Hell every morning at seven. It was said in the voice of Jack Spicer."¹ The book emerges beneath two signatories: the author George Bowering (whose proper name authenticates the book) and the disembodied voice of Jack Spicer, whose proper name re-formulates the deceased, primal father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and who, as a spectral subject, haunts the text's unwindings to a degree that can never be fully ascertained.

The poem opens with a paradoxical phenomenon: a snowball in hell placed in the book prior to all metaphoric operation and akin to an arche-image, providing the *condition*, not the sense of, *Allophanes* as a writing. From its initial appearance the snowball in hell will extend a profound ambivalence. Reappearing and permuting, it will always be that to which the work is attached yet from which it is constantly escaping. At times the condition of change, at times the change itself, the sentence will never escape its temporal predicament and will raise constantly the question of the productivity of its own signifiatory ground. As Jean Paris puts it, "the question which begins here no longer springs from the sign because, on the contrary, it supposes it; it no longer concerns in criticism, either the signifier or the signified, either speech or writing, but the gap itself from which these will be engendered, or, if one prefers, this articulation whose other name would be: *change*" (11). This moment, where space explicates itself, will be the moment in which the infernal snowball is born into writing as a writing; a dictated and a written moment that asserts its identity as its own rupture.

Allophanes's cover merits attention, its central design is an excised triangle in the space of which is a text comprising geometric shapes and symbols suggestive of pictographs or hieroglyphs. Through a fold in the paper, the cover's underside becomes a surface. The triangular excision in this way serves to frame a part of the cover's unexposed side. As a result of this cut and fold, the cover's recto-verso distinction collapses producing a profound discontinuity upon the cover's plane. An interiority is presented as external and the notion of page is immediately doubled

1 From the jacket copy of *Allophanes*.

(opening the cover to meet the title page this other surface is not seen).² The triangle is redolent with associations; it is the diagrammatic relation of signifier to signified through a referent apex doubling the form of the Greek letter *delta*. It also appears at various points within the body of the poem: the horizontal effect of the tent (at the end of section VI) and the triangular torso of the pictogram of St. Arte (Astarte?) that concludes section V. Letter, talisman, Christian trinity, Mesopotamian female deity, pyramid, inverted pubis are all evoked.

Clearly this cover lacks a utilitarian function. Partly concealing, partly announcing a promised interiority it folds to bring its verso plane into visibility through a gap in the front, presenting a physical lack that shows more than it would had the surface not been excised. An instability is introduced into the nature of the surface which now carries tri-partite implications as a cover, a frame, and a frivolous subversion. The non-phonetic “text” thus framed in the triangle participates in the cover’s system without actually being an element of it. The opening sentence is framed precisely in the way these non-phonetic characters are framed “inside” the cover. As a received dictation, it enters the poem as a perverse “fold” in the writing and similarly participates without membership. Rendering *all* quotations in the book contaminated, this sentence further prevents the writing from being a first order operation; it cannot even gain an innocence but must inscribe itself and its implications intertextually, with a constant referral to another voice beneath the surface of the writing, held absent but constantly recalled inside of the writing’s shifting scenes, which work ambivalently throughout the poem to include the exclusion of this sentence.

Catastrophic moments in *Allophanes* occur when the poem’s continuous and repeated fabric, its homogenous, phonemic plane, erupts into non-phonetic events. There is always the danger of this other script (occasionally folding to reveal from its back the script of the Other, i.e. Spicer’s) emerging as an alternate writing. As the cover erupts its under-surface, so too the 25 sections of the poem always threaten a catastrophic folding into another script. We have already witnessed the appearance of St. Arte in section V and the non-phonetic complex in the cover’s triangular lack. But there are several others too. We should take instant account of the facts that the poem’s title (on cover and title page) is spelled in Greek, that

2 We might note, in passing, that the cover in this way reveals its material *from the back*, i.e. the copulatory position of the Wolf Man’s parents as Freud recounts it in his famous case history. It is also the direction of weaving (i.e. textuality). Freud can be sensed throughout *Allophanes* as a voice beyond the absent one of Jack Spicer.

the Hebrew aleph appears in section XVI, and that a gestural mark resembling a hand-drawn number 9 appears in section XIV. These other scripts inscribe cultural difference within the poem's anglophonic medium and suggest not the protean combinatory structure of phonetic writing, but a prior writing, now banished (like Freud's primary repression) to a place behind the cover, folded, reversed, engulfed, and smothered below the surface of the manifest writing.

The poem's key image too, is not without its catastrophic part. SNOWBALL in its pure, phonetic form is host to a pictographic element. The third letter O functions as an introjected pictogram visually miming the word's meaning. We can think of this letter as the snowball's anasemic state, phoneticism's radical other within itself, invaginated, like the cover, and disseminated as a pictographic contaminant throughout the poem. In acknowledging this anasemic element in *Allophanes* we open up the poem to a bewildering play within its own micro-structures. Wherever an O occurs (in "god" and "dog" for instance) then the catastrophic moment takes effect, unassimilable in a conventional reading and on the order of a waste in the poem's semantic economy.

The scene of *Allophanes* can now be specified as the field of a thread working back and forth across two spectral columns: a spectral subject (Spicer as the absent-cause, the Primal Father in a new guise) and spectral scripts (Greek, Hebrew, non-phonetic, pictographic, and anasemic). The transformations of the infernal snowball are staged upon this field. Section I introduces the matrix sentence, "The snowball appears in Hell / every morning at seven" which itself seems aporetic: how can a snowball that depends on cold for its existence appear in Hell with its attendant heat and flames? This in itself generates a binary opposition: cold / heat to be submitted to numerous permutations. In section II, the sentence bifurcates and pursues two different itineraries. One links snow to architecture: ("snow castles / are alright for lyric poems"), while Hell connects with mass communication ("Now its as real as a newspaper / headline in Hell"). The snowball appears iconically for the first time in section III as a picto-ideogrammic mark: a black sphere. Its shape figures the *ball*, yet its blackness opposes the white of the snow. (These oppositions within items are numerous and prohibit any simple, unitary meaning to the work.) Hell shifts context into "we grow old together, / we will never meet in Hell" and the snowball re-situates in the assertion "the snowball is not the cold." The anasemic operation can be traced in the emergence of the letter O as a pictographic imbed.

In section IV the two images contextualize within the heat-cold opposition. Hell's thermal connotations echo in the "*coeur flambé*" while the snowball develops in a question: "& what would a snowball / know about polar knowledge?" In VI, Hell initiates a literary allusion ("I haven't got a Dante's chance in Hell") before the snowball transforms to become the white sphere of the baseball and ignites a chain of content that will be centered on George's favourite sport. ("That snowball's got red stitches (& it's imitating God. / Tells me from third to home / is The Way Down and Out.")

Hell's thermal connotations appear again in section VII. Asking where "Maud has gone" the speaker elaborates: "She crouches / over the fire / her back curved / to her care." The matrix image at this point begins to self-contaminate and fold back into itself. As a scene of repetition the section invests in the possibility to break down the discrete partition of the binary opposition. In this case Hell's thermal territory is insinuated by at least three terms from baseball: "crouch," "curve," and "back." A clean structuralist reading of *Allophanes* is thus impossible, for one set of oppositions erupts inside the other and proliferates a carcinoma of highly local, ludic meanings. In VIII Hell assumes the role of destination as the snowball-baseball transmogrifies into "a spilled ice cream ball, / kick it to hell & Gone, / & turning the cone over, / place it on your head." The triangle here has become conical, while the transformation: snowball/ice-cream enjoys a thermal rationale for the change. In section IX the snowball becomes a "hot" image: "pluck the melting sno-cone of the lightbulb." This melting process (the "w" has melted from "snow") continues through section X, but not without contamination: "See the word made white & melting / before the turn of the fiery wheel." The heat here is *white* heat, i.e. the colour of snow. Then the snowball reappears ideogramatically in "The world's meaning is exactly / fol de rol de rolly O." In the concluding command of this section ("Stamp the snow off your boots / onto the face of the rug") the final word echoes *rouge* (i.e. the red stitches of the snowball-baseball of section VI) whose semantic associations through colour lead back to the red-heat-fire-Hell series.

In section XI the snowball as egg reappears in a scene of word-play: "the egg ziled gods," and Hell inheres homophonically embedded in the "ell" of "Nellie": ("Run for the roundhouse, Nellie, he cant corner you there.") The triangle-cone development re-enters in the allusion to Empedocles ("Wear your best suit / when you jump into a volcano"). The *cano* in "volcano" continues another homophonic chain, inaugurated earlier with the phrase in section X: "I see the dog licking it

up, i.e. the white word melting he turns & goes home cano mirabilis." (The "I see" beginning this phrase further contaminates the heat/cold opposition in being the homophone of "icy.") "Dog" itself is a reverse form of "god" whose theological meanings proliferate the poem. Section X, in fact, opens with "et verbum cano factum est" and later (XIX) comes the "Dog turds / discolouring the snow / about them." The volcano reechoes in two phrases of XII: "the perilous deterioration of dynamite" and explicitly in the following: "on TV we sat breathless as death, / watching them blast the top off the mountain, // to begin, to make a perfect earth, a perfect smooth black orb."

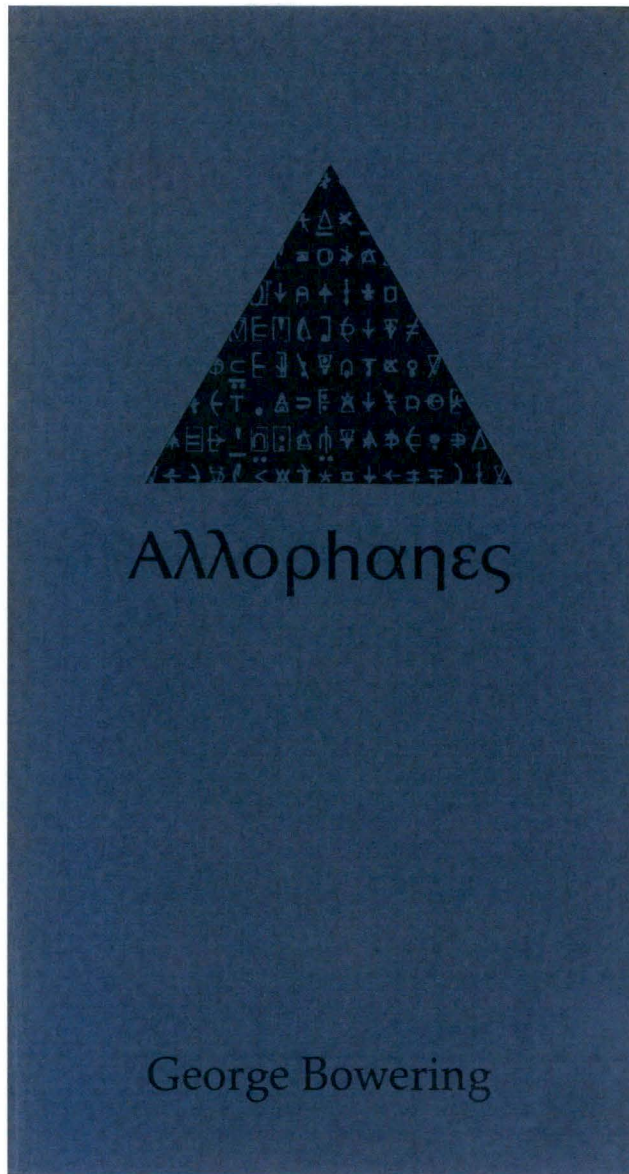
Speaking on the nature of poetic images Paul Valéry makes mention of their "indefinitely repeated generation" in a system of "cyclical substitutions" (29). Creativity and repetition for Valéry are conjunctive, but repetition is of a different order in *Allophanes*. The reiterations here are disjunctions staged within the scene of the "other" writing. The book is profoundly dialogic and its writing situates between two further writings: a spectral and largely non-phonetic other, and a manifest writing of permutation and homophonic play. Recall that the play of the same and the other is carried out upon a space of repetition that sets the grid for the series of spatio-temporal recurrences. As linguistic imbeds inside floating contexts they are marked more by their provisionality than by their semantic obdurance. Moreover, the repetitions serve as generative disjunctions and logical contaminants, which determine the semantic rhythm of the poem through its 25 sections.

Allophanes is weighty in its insistence that we cannot write the word, only process it through a labyrinth of re-writings leaving as a residue, the space of spacing itself as the condition of the gaps that delineate the poem's discontinuities and the differential zones in which its transformations occur.

Works Cited

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 Paris, Jean. "The Writing Machine." *Sub-Stance* 16 (1977): 11.
 Valéry, Paul. "The Idea of Art." *Aesthetics*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Ed. Harold Osborne. Oxford UP, 1972.

This essay is a shortened and revised version of "Under the Blowpipe: George Bowering's *Αλλοφανες*," composed in 1986 and published in *North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1986*.



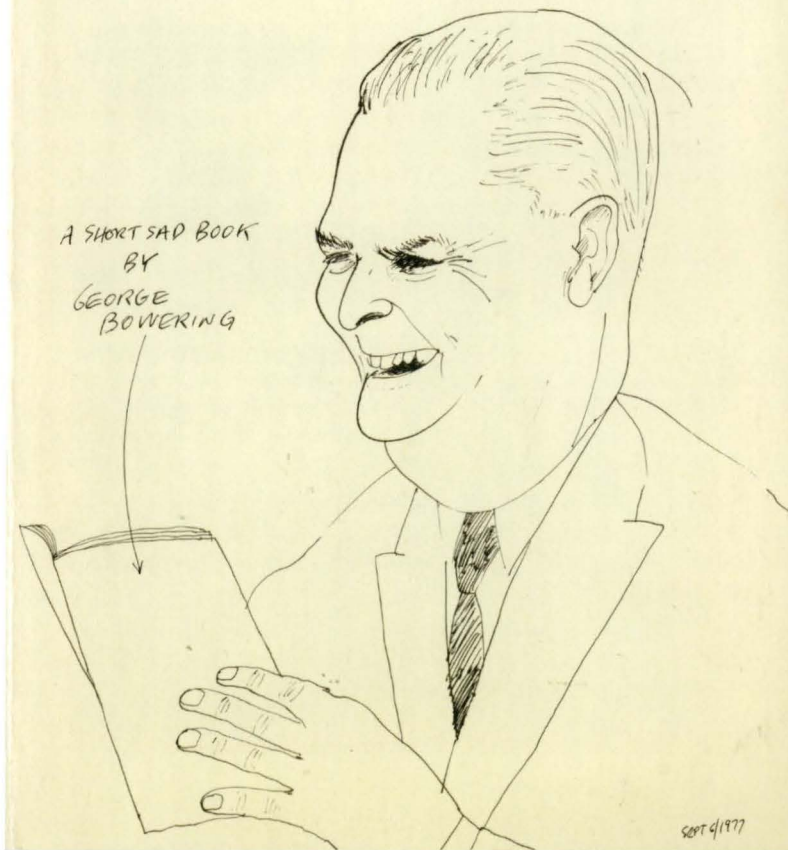
Allophanes (Toronto, Coach House, 1976).

Dedication: for Robin Blaser.

GB composed the text while sitting in on an undergrad course given by Robin Blaser in the fall of 1974 at SFU. "I happened to hear [Spicer's] voice when I was going to a series of lectures that Robin Blaser was giving on Yeats and Joyce, but mainly Yeats. And I heard it while I was sitting there so I started writing. I guess everyone thought I was just taking notes from the lecture. (Miki 46)

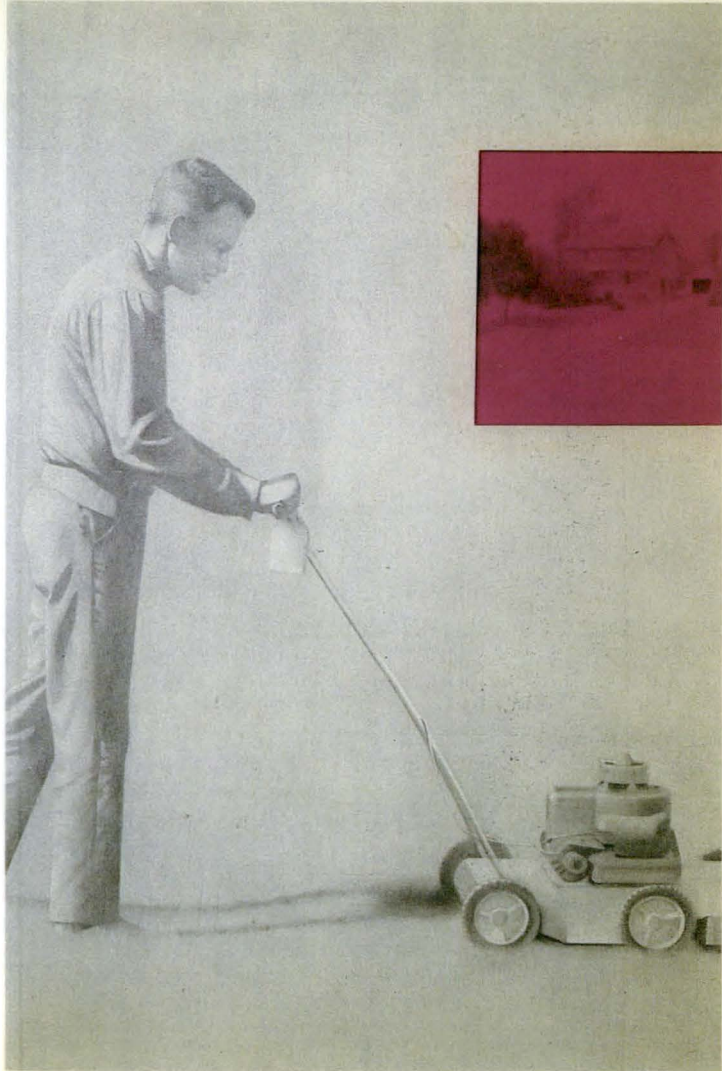
A SHORT SAD BOOK

George Bowering



A Short Sad Book (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1977).
Cover drawing by Greg Curnoe depicting former premier of BC,
WAC Bennett, laughing while reading *A Short Sad Book*.

Particular Accidents
Selected Poems / George Bowering



Particular Accidents: Selected Poems. Edited by Robin Blaser
(Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980). The cover image is a detail from a
drawing by Jack Chambers, "Grass Box No. 2." Blaser's introductory
essay is titled "George Bowering's Plain Song."



George and books; his office at SFU, 1979. Photo used for dust jacket of *Burning Water*.