

MIRIAM NICHOLS / George Bowering and the New American Poetry: A Conversation

The excerpts below come from an April 16, 2014 interview with George Bowering that I conducted for my current project, a biography of Robin Blaser. I wanted to get a sense of how Bowering perceived the New American poetry as it developed in the 1950s and '60s and how he positioned Blaser among the diverse energies of that generation of writers. These brief excerpts seem relevant to Bowering's poetic practice as well as to Blaser's.

Miriam Nichols: Was it in Warren [Tallman's] class that you were first introduced to the New American poetry?

George Bowering: For some people it was. For other people—see, before the *New American Poetry* anthology came out there were plenty of books that we were getting somehow. In those days you could get books. So around 1957, there were lots and lots of interesting books coming out by people like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and Michael McClure. There was all kinds of stuff, but when the *New American Poetry* anthology came out in 1960, it wasn't a sudden nova. It was, Oh! here's all these guys that we like gathered in one volume.

MN: What about Charles Olson? Did you meet Olson in print before the anthology came out?

GB: Oh yeah. But it was close to when one got to read all these people. For instance, people were reading *Origin* magazine.

MN: So *Origin* made its way to UBC. Was that courtesy of the Tallmans?

GB: I don't know. I was keeping track for myself. It was different for different people. I was keeping track of things going on in the States and what publishers there were. I remember when Charles Watts was doing stuff for the SFU library, I was incredibly impressed by the range of knowledge he had about where things were being published. But that's the sort of thing I aspired to. So I was ordering

books from American bookstores—one in Ohio and another one in California and one in New York. And in those days, it didn't cost that much to mail those things.

MN: Don Allen did an anthology before the *New American Poetry*. It was the San Francisco issue of *Evergreen Review*?

GB: Yeah, No. 2, which I still have a copy of, of course.

MN: You got *Measure* as well from John Wieners?

GB: Yeah, I got *Measure* and the one that LeRoi Jones did... *Yugen*.

MN: And Diane DiPrima did *The Floating Bear*.

GB: Yeah. That's who *TISH* got our mailing list from. We wrote away to them, and then years later the guys at the Artists' Workshop in Detroit—I used to go down there all the time when I was in London, Ontario—John Sinclair and all those guys, wrote us and asked us for our mailing list. So things get played around, right?

MN: So—you were in Warren's class at UBC?

GB: No, I sat in, maybe three times, maybe four. Fred Wah was in the class, I'm pretty sure. Everybody else was in his class. I don't know why I wasn't. I think it may have been because I had a whole pile of courses. You see I did my BA in History, so I had a whole pile of English courses to make up and they would be in certain areas and I had done a lot of English courses before that but they hadn't been in [the required] areas. So I was never officially in his class, just as I was never officially in Earle Birney's writing class, but I attended.

MN: Were you there in '63 for the Vancouver Poetry Conference?

GB: Oh yeah. The only one of us that wasn't there was—well, Frank Davey now claims that he was there for a couple of meetings but he had to work. Everyone thought, oh Frank isn't here, I wonder why that is.

MN: I think you also made a trip to San Francisco in '62, did you not?

GB: Yeah, that's where I first met people like Stan Persky and so on. That's where I went over to Robin's place and the guy he was living with, Jim Felts. They had a great seafood dinner. In those days I didn't eat any seafood at all, but I didn't tell

them. I just sat down and ate everything I got. On the same trip, Robert Duncan showed me how to eat an artichoke. That was really a food summer, because there was a place in North Beach—it was kind of a bakery but it was also kind of a deli and you could go and get one of those little loaves of bread, like a really small, European loaf of bread and fill it up with slices of luncheon meat and that would be your food for the whole day—because I was not well off. I had a Canadian \$20 bill in my wallet and I'd go to a movie and say this is all I've got and they'd say oh, go in.

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MN: I've been curious for quite a long time about who, at that time when you were starting out as a writer, you favoured of the New Americans. Was it Allen Ginsberg or Duncan or Olson or...?

GB: It would change a little I think. You see it was pretty well San Francisco oriented for most of us, for our crowd, because of Ellen and the people coming up from San Francisco. Olson was obviously a big deal. For Gladys it was Jack Kerouac. And I think for Daphne—Daphne's big river poem is so Olson, you know. It was before she aimed her attention toward women writers. But her approach there was so Olson, especially the thing about the body, proprioception and all that stuff. Standing on logs and mixing that sense of the personal body in that context with that whole mapping thing that everybody was crazy about in those days. Everybody was putting it on the covers of their magazines.

MN: What about *Autobiology*?

GB: Nah, that's Gertrude Stein. I remember Duncan doing Stein imitations and so we all—well not all—imitated Stein. After I wrote that book then a couple of other people wrote books that were influenced by it.

MN: But the whole idea of "autobiology" is quite Olsonian isn't it?

GB: Did I make up the term, biotext? Did I use it to talk about Fred's poetry at one point? I was trying to remember that the other day. Somebody told me it was, but I can't remember. I was big on Kerouac myself, because I was a prose writer, and certainly I think Creeley, a really big deal. Okay, it's obviously going to be Creeley and Duncan. It became Spicer later. But Creeley, Duncan, and Olson. And then each of us would go for the next group of people. Jamie Reid was interested in

19th-century French poetry. And he was a little bit Gregory Corso-ish. And another thing I was reading a lot of was 20th-century French fiction and a lot of that was being published by Evergreen in translation. I wasn't reading it in French.

MN: This is not fiction, but did you read Antonin Artaud?

GB: Yeah, for sure, and Henri Michaux. I had a picture of Artaud on my long, long wall in Montreal. He was so beautiful. He was incredibly hideously ugly when he was old, but when he was a young actor he was unbelievably beautiful. So you haven't mentioned many women's names outside of Gertrude Stein. I got onto H.D. young. It was a fluke for me. I got onto H.D. in high school.

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MN: I was trying to work around through this material to Robin, because my feeling is that you got to know Robin a little bit *after* the early '60s.

GB: I met him then and talked to him a little bit, but the thing that you might not know is that for a while I was going to be the publisher of *The Moth Poem*. I was corresponding with Stan. Then I realized, no, the way I can produce magazines and books, they look ugly.

MN: This was connected with *TISH* production?

GB: No, no, this was my magazine, *Imago*, and the little things I did along with it. This would be in 1963 or '64. I think I started it in the fall of '63 or spring of '64. I moved to Calgary, it may have been '64, and Stan—there was correspondence going on that had to do, some of it, with White Rabbit and some of it with *Open Space*. It was around that time and I was going to do it. There was a lot of Blaser stuff and it wasn't getting published. I guess Stan had sent me *The Moth Poem* and I wanted to do it.

MN: So that was the first poem of his you'd seen?

GB: No, because there was the Boston stuff¹ in the *New American Poetry*. And there must have been a few things here and there. But *The Moth Poem* just struck

1 "The Boston stuff" in *The New American Poetry*: "Poem by the Charles River," "A 4 Part Geometry Lesson," "Hérons," and two pieces titled "Poem" (138-41). These pieces were written during Blaser's four-year stay in Boston where he worked as a librarian at the Widener Library, Harvard.

me. I started the magazine for long poems and here was this perfect thing. But then I thought no, it just won't look good enough. I was always embarrassed about that and sad and so forth, but I just couldn't do it.

MN: Well, you know Open Space [as chapbook publishers] brought it out.

GB: Yes, and it looks really nice.

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MN: This is a poetics question. Where would you position Robin among his peers? Spicer and Duncan and Olson. What I'm trying to get at is the difference, right? So for you, as a writer—you read all kinds of other people's work and you took this and that, liked this and didn't like that. What's the Blaser difference?

GB: I'm sure that, and you probably are too, that Duncan and Spicer thought of him as the younger, more lightweight.

MN: Yeah.

GB: I grew up reading, first of all, Duncan a lot and then Spicer—I was suspicious of Spicer. I was suspicious of that prose line, I was suspicious of the surrealism. I reviewed one of his books and suggested my suspicion even in that and it took me a long time to get around—I think maybe his lectures got me turned around a little bit. But I'd been turned around before by Ginsberg. Earlier I'd said, with the Pound line, that the romantics were slushy. At the '63 Poetry Conference Ginsberg recited *Adonais* by heart somewhere outside. And I thought, "holy shit." Then he also did *Mont Blanc*, probably the most difficult and best poem of all time. And I was just, "Oh my God! I think maybe Ezra Pound was a cranky old guy." So I started reading and became a Shelley guy.

Now Blaser, I never needed to get turned around on Blaser. You didn't see as much Blaser stuff. You didn't see the books. That was true of Jack as well. It took a long time to get the books out. Every book of Blaser's was really good. So as the years went by, I began to think, well, maybe Duncan wasn't the centre of that whole thing. Maybe he wasn't the most important, learned—maybe you can see certain things he didn't know that you know and so forth.

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MN: Are there things that you found useful in Robin's work [for your own writing]? Is there any one of his poems or serials that has been of particular importance to you?

GB: Well, every once in a while when I needed to unclog myself, I would sit down and read his poems out loud and they are so *there*. Putting an ice cube on your forehead when you have a headache and are all stressed out is not unimportant. He's a great poet and I was responsible for him getting the Griffin Award. I was really proud of that. And I was there that night to see him accept it. As to poems that were important to me: those early sequences, "Cups" and "The Moth Poem," in the '60s. "Cups" was eventually published in Don Allen's wonderful *Writing* series, but it took us a whole decade to get that little fish in our hands. These poems are so damned lovely in their exact music, exact within the context of free—isn't that a wonderful thing? It is such a privilege to read those poems aloud, to feel and hear the lines in their precise music.

MN: Robin edited your selected poems for Talonbooks in 1980: *Particular Accidents*. You and he must have worked together pretty closely on that?

GB: Yeah. But see I've always been partly shy to go over to somebody's place and also partly oh, I don't want to disturb—he's got enough people disturbing him. So I didn't go over nearly as often as I could have, while all these other young punks were over there all the time. So I was really touched and pleased by what he did.

MN: Well, he brings you into an idea of form that is processive as opposed to fixed and I think that was an important statement.

GB: He was also aware of all that nonsense and horseshit going on that was opposing what I was doing, so he wanted to clear that away. I was really pleased.

MN: What about the process of selecting the poems for *Particular Accidents*? Did you and Blaser collaborate on that?

GB: I think that the choice and order was all Robin's, and once in a while he might ask me something, but in all such cases I have preferred to see what the other person does.

MN: In his introductory essay, Blaser remarks on your "extraordinary sense of language"—the "authentic" versus the "conventions"—and he cites a comment of

yours he dates from 1976, “‘The language is burning’” (11). Do you recall what you might have meant by that comment? Has your sense of language in poetry shifted?

GB: Here’s how I currently interpret my remark of way back when: that language is closer to energy than it is to matter, or put better, if it resembles any of the four elements, it is fire.

MN: What about the context Blaser sets up for your work in his introduction to *Particular Accidents*? I’m thinking of the division in the genealogy of Canadian writing that literary critics used to make at mid-20th century, between an art that responds to literary convention and another than responds to lived circumstance (18-19). Blaser situates you with the latter, citing Frank Davey on the *TISH* poets as closer to “‘the ‘universist’ line of Lampman, Carman, W.W.E. Ross, Klein, Souster, Layton, and Purdy rather than to the humanist and rationalist one of Goldsmith, Sangster, Pratt, Smith, F.R. Scott, Finch, LePan, Reaney, Mandel and Gustafson’” (19). What do you think of these divisions now that the line-up of poets has changed so much. How does “then” look in the light of “now”?

GB: I think we were right then, but now is not then. And one thing some of the few remaining critics have pointed out about my writing is that so much of it takes its first foothold in previous writing, that I revise, imitate, contradict, embrace, renew earlier writing by people such as Shelley, Keats, Williams. I don’t want to be traditional; I want to be in the tradition.

MN: What about current literary communities? Are there new writers you find particularly engaging? Who are you reading now?

GB: For me, “new” writers can be 55 years old. Erin Moure is my great hope. She followed my *Curious* with her *Furious*, and has kept getting better and better while losing her early lyric audience. Hooray for her! Lisa Robertson was my student and now I am hers, in another way. But this question is often asked of writers, and it is uncomfortable, because you will forget to mention someone. I do correspond with a lot of writers who are in their thirties and early forties, and have collaborated with two of them, Ryan Knighton and Charles Demers. Soon I will be sucking up to the twenties crowd.