

## ALESSANDRA CAPPERDONI / George Bowering's Poetry as Cultural Poetics

My current reading of George Bowering's poetry situates his writing in relation to the discourse of neoliberalism that governs our era and the "nationalist politics" that permeated the inception of CanLit. George Bowering's poetics offers a critical analysis of the insidious ways in which neoliberal ideology has entered Canada's social and political stage through a "politics of space" that relies upon, rather than disintegrates, the "absolute space" produced by nationalist politics (Smith and Katz). This critical interrogation is particularly significant in the context of the history and institutionalization of Canadian literature that privileged a national framework for the reading of culture. It is in response to this nationalist model that the poetic experimentations of postmodern poetries emerging from the cultural scene of Vancouver and the West Coast in the 1960s, of which Bowering was a central figure, articulated an important contestatory practice by working through the Olsonian notion of "locus." But as the language of economic globalization made its way into the cultural logic of the 1980s, and locality was increasingly co-opted as a tool of social fragmentation in the service of increasingly aggressive neoliberal politics, one faces the question of how effective was the postmodern turn to "locus" and what these poetics can offer us for the present moment.

I would like to consider Bowering's poetry as the articulation of a cultural poetics exposing—and taking to task—the conceptual space-time fixity of the nation-state produced by neoliberal ideology *before* neoliberalism became part of mainstream discourse in Canada. In the spirit of the *avant-garde* (though Bowering himself has often distanced himself from the term), Bowering's poetics exceeds the celebration of locality which many postmodern critics have identified as a central preoccupation of his work. I want to look in particular at two works, *Rocky Mountain Foot* and *Kerrisdale Elegies*, written at two key moments in Canada's history: the buoyant (nationalist) 1960s of *Rocky Mountain Foot*, published in 1968, and the free-trade-inflected 1980s of *Kerrisdale Elegies*, published in 1984. Both poems re-politicize time and space against the closed histories and geographies produced by nationalist and neoliberal ideology. The texts show the way in which

the nation, rather than a “container of identities,” is a scale at which capital and the State operate. Predating the theoretical inquiries of cultural theorists and geographers, Bowering shows how neoliberal ideologies need more than ever the complicit action of the State to forcibly open new markets, guarantee the operations of capital and, simultaneously, harden national borders against disruptive social forces. That both poems are texts grounded in “the city” is also a marker of Bowering’s attentiveness to a specific shift in scale in the operations of capital—from “nation” to “city”—taking place at the time under scrutiny. *Rocky Mountain Foot* and *Kerrisdale Elegies* focus on urban space as increasingly defined by economics and the structures of feelings that economics harnesses to the formation of social identities—the hopes, buoyancy, euphoria (Derksen), as well as insecurity generated by the discourse of “crisis” that neoliberal ideology generates in order to produce complacent subjectivities.

Playing with the lyric mode of poetic vision and the serial structure of postmodern poetry à la Spicer, the poetic sequence *Rocky Mountain Foot* disassembles the landscape machine of the picturesque and the sublime of nationalist poetry by showing their imperial logic. But it also unhinges the “local pride” of Albertan and Calgarian subjectivities from a naturalized notion of “emotions” to show how structures of feelings can also be retooled in the service of the cultural dominance of capital. In the poem “The Oil,” the prairie is the site of energy sources available for exploitation—the straight line of highways, wheat elevators, oil derricks, and train tracks pointing to a mechanization process and expanding industrialization. At the same time, buffalo and Indian fields are reminders of a different, pre-existing, and now displaced economy making visible processes of territorialisation:

Alberta

floats on a pool of natural gas  
The Peigans knew nothing of  
in their fright  
in their flight  
to the mountains.

We owe them that. (29)

The near extermination of the buffalo, co-terminous with indigenous economy, has paved the way for the defacement of the land, now turned into energy reservoir for Canada's (and increasingly North America's) industrialization engine. The displacement of the Peigans is brought to a halt in the assonant coupling of "fright" and "flight," charged with the affective intensities that geographical and cultural uprooting produce. The ambiguity of the line, "We owe them that" reminds readers not only of the systemic dispossession that makes 'development' and 'progress' possible, but the ongoing debt that the nation-state owes Native people. In light of the grievances of Aboriginal peoples and the *ressentiment* voiced through increasing political action at the present time (Coultard), this debt begs for something more than an empty gesture of reconciliation or healing: Are we willing to return the land to its original inhabitants? Which measures are we willing to adopt to redress historical injustices? Meanwhile, the poetic eye can only witness and document the ongoing transformation of land and place into a space for consumption:

Now a  
    Cadillac, I see a  
                    nother Cadillac, & there  
is the black straight road, &  
                    a Cadillac,  
                                    two Cadillacs  
on the road, racing, North,  
                    the mountains to the left  
blurred by a passing  
    Cadillac. (30)

It is in the city poems that these contradictions become even more apparent and show the way in which the nation-state is in fact operating as imperial State. Capital is not an outside force or a challenge to the nation but, fully incorporated into State politics, activates different interests and emotions. In "Above Calgary," for example, the aerial photo of the city shows the homogenization of land and people in line with the dream of a national, city-based, unified subjectivity. But the illusionary potential of 'local pride' is immediately undercut by the underlying economic interests determining city dwelling, as apartment blocks and houses appear like boxes "arranged / in squares by contractors" (42) and interests only



apparently mutually exclusive—politics, petty interests, and religious discourse—are shown to be fully imbricated with the logic of capital (“crops and the flag / built on the new testament” 26).

It is in this light that we can read *Kerrisdale Elegies*, published at a time of intense capital investment in Vancouver shortly before the signing of the NAFTA agreement in 1987, as a long poem that brings into visibility what Wilson and Dissanayake have called the spatial realization of socio-political contradictions. This city-text grounds Kerrisdale materially in its social and political context (the neighbourhood as dynamically participant in the contested meanings of political and economic space). But while Kerrisdale is being re-shaped by the interests of national and global capitalism under the “aesthetic of economic change” (Mitchell 232)—the goal being the integration of Vancouver, Canada’s gateway to the Pacific Rim, into the global economy—the neighbourhood is never a static, inert space. To the free flow of capital through the city it opposes an urban text dwelling on the particular and the estranged.

The poems refrain from adopting a purely descriptive stance but turn the feelings produced by neoliberal discourse into the object of analysis. The gentrification of Kerrisdale is in fact a shop-window of consumerist desires constructing new social subjectivities:

The alleged world outside fades before our eyes.

Remember that big house at 38<sup>th</sup> and Larch?

Look now:

a translucent spectre rises there,

comfortable

as the notion of home still building in your brain.

So all your neighbours have built this city block,

ethereal as their own passing conversations.

They

would put leaves on their naked pear trees.

They build a stadium of the heart downtown,  
and will never find their way to the game. (Elegy 9, 99)

Anticipating the notion of the “city of glass” (but in less euphoric and more critical terms than Douglas Coupland’s about its effects) the poem plays with the obvious desires that the “new economy” is producing in the subject. Less a citizen than a consumer, the city-dweller brushes against the imaginary possibilities emerging from the seductive discourse of new belongings (the “comfortable” home of the condo in the translucent high rise as a sign of middle-upper class status) and his stroll to the Stadium which a maze of desires (as in a play of mirrors) will prevent them from reaching. The much celebrated fluidity of identity of postmodern cultural logic seems to achieve its culmination, while the “ethereal” imaging of the city block points to the dematerialization of class (and race) politics. The citizen-consumers can hardly be imagined as active members of the polis. No civic action is possible when the endgame can only be the (literal) match at the Stadium (completed in 1983 in preparation for Expo 1986) which, paradoxically, they will hardly be able to find in their dream-like state of consumerist bliss. Yet, the poem does not adopt a defeatist stance: dreams can be broken and the ghosts of the past may still be haunting a defaced present.

Against the flatness of the imagined national space, *Kerrisdale Elegies* re-situates locality as a poetic act and poesis as life: writing as the measure of temporal and spatial difference. Capital circulation is not semantically excluded, yet the form does not allow for the erasure of the contingencies of the lived at the hand of economic transaction. Excess is not the effect of money exchange (the illusion produced by capitalist ideology) but the insertion of difference in the presentness of the here:

This is not

poetry,  
    neither is it play;  
                it is life  
whether you like it or not,  
                money  
changes hands,  
                the sun goes purple and gold  
behind the trees,

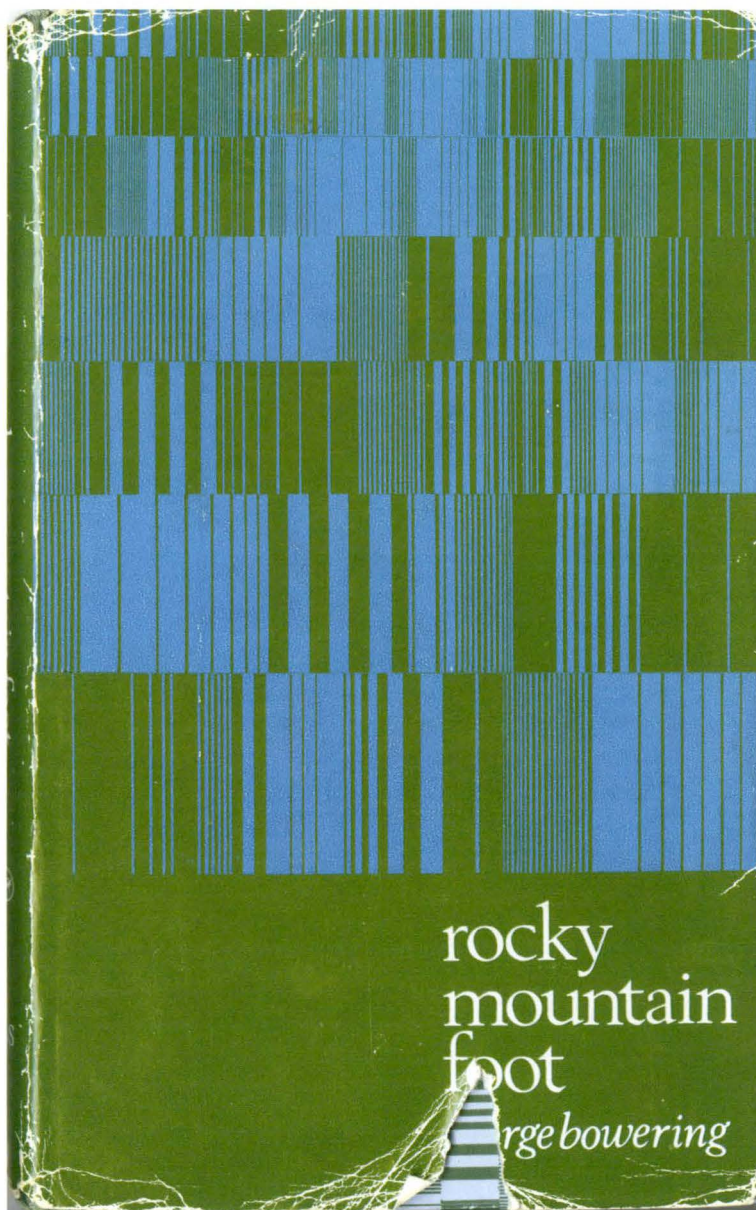
the lights come on bright,  
the ball is white,  
and someone  
has to pay for it. (Elegy 5, 74)

But, in fact, this is poetry. What Bowering's cultural poetics shows is culture that moves beyond its documentary (or reflexive) aspect and, rather, generates a *mode of analysis* (Derksen 2014) which can actively intervene into, and productively change, the current imperatives produced in affective terms by neoliberal discourse through a politics of space.

## Works Cited

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*Rocky Mountain Foot* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969)

Dedication: *no dedication is necessary, | but I would like to say hello to: |*  
Chief Walking Eagle | Bob Edwards | Sitting Bull | Jabez Harry Bowering  
*| (They were all there)*

DELAYED MERCY  
AND OTHER POEMS  
BY GEORGE  
BOWERING



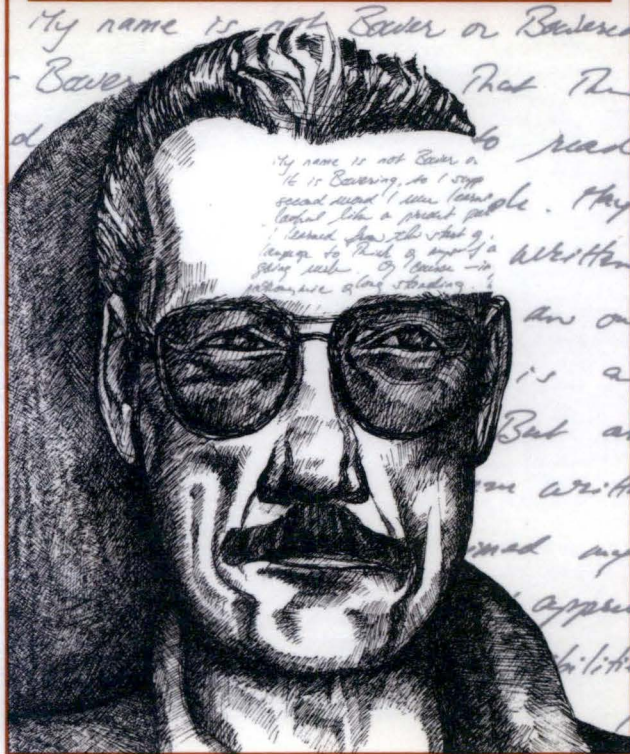
COACH HOUSE PRESS

*Delayed Mercy and Other Poems* (Toronto: Coach House, 1987).  
Cover painting by Franz Von Stuck, *Syrinx blasender Faun am Meer*.

"Irene Niechoda took a photograph of that painting in the Von Stuck house in Germany and gave it to me, and I thought wonderful, that'll be the cover of my book" (GB to Roy Miki, 81). The serial poem "Delayed Mercy" was written late at night, one poem per night, incorporating a line from a book read during the day. "Irritable Reaching" is a series of acrostics for writers and artists from Atwood to Zonko. The phrase "irritable reaching" is from Keats: "I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Miki 84).

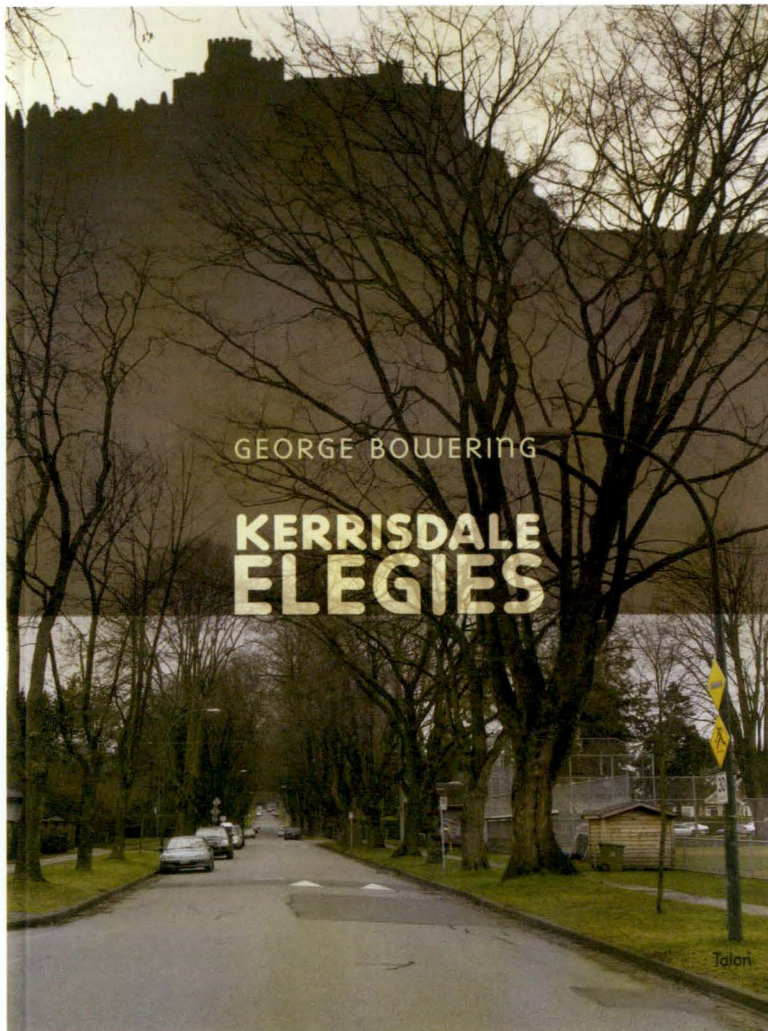


# ERRATA



GEORGE BOWERING

*Errata* (Red Deer: RDC Press, 1988). Dedication: For Shirley Neuman, Smaro Kamboureli | and Linda Hutcheon.



*Kerrisdale Elegies* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008), a reprint of the 1984 edition published by Coach House.

Epigraph: Here a star, and there a star, | Some lose their way! | Here a mist — and there a mist — | Afterwards — day! | Emily Dickinson

“—a poem set in Kerrisdale...to write a poem about Kerrisdale, to prove that you could even write a poem about Kerrisdale.” (GB to Roy Miki, 75-76)