

IAN RAE / The Art of (Re)collecting: Bowering and the London Scene

I remember that Greg Curnoe was a great collector. I have always liked collectors, and I understand collecting. (Bowering *Moustache* 79)

Most scholars agree that Bowering's involvement with the *TISH* collective at the University of British Columbia in the early 1960s helped him to formulate a poetics that he has elaborated, revised, and memorialized but never abandoned. *TISH* arose from a study group on Charles Olson's 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," and evolved into collective publishing ventures, such as the *TISH* poetry newsletter (1961-1966), as well as journals that combined creative and critical dialogue, such as Bowering's *Imago* (1964-74) and Frank Davey's *Open Letter* (1965-2013). However, in every phase of Bowering's career, he has simultaneously involved himself with other art scenes outside of Vancouver. For example, Jason Wiens has demonstrated that Bowering committed himself to developing an Okanagan aesthetic before, during, and after *TISH*. Between 1963 and 1972, Bowering pursued teaching and writing opportunities outside of British Columbia and he quickly developed a knack for choosing cities at the height of their creative ferment, insinuating himself into the company of the city's leading artists. For example, he began a PhD in London, Ontario, at the zenith of the city's art scene in 1966 and then landed a writer-in-residence position in Montreal in time for Expo '67. I edited *George Bowering: Bridges to Elsewhere*, a special issue of *Open Letter* (2010), to call attention to the range of these connections to writers, historians, and visual artists across Canada.

However, a gap in this special issue concerns the influence of London poets and painters on Bowering. The most comprehensive survey of this interface is the chapter on "Bowering and the London Scene" in Eva-Marie Kröller's *George Bowering: Bright Circles of Colour* (1992), where she explores "interdependencies" between Bowering and Canadian visual artists (11). However, Kröller's book appeared too soon to address a key document in this interface, Bowering's *The Moustache: Memories of Greg Curnoe* (1993), which eulogized the painter, sculptor, and occasional poet after his sudden death in a cycling accident in November,

1992. My article here will demonstrate how Bowering uses mimicry and homage in *The Moustache* as part of his career-long attempt to find commonalities between the *TISH* aesthetics of composition by field and the regionalist aesthetics of the London scene.

In the 1960s, London attracted national and international attention for “the extraordinary vitality of the contemporary art scene” (Théberge 160), which spanned the visual arts (Jack Chambers, Greg Curnoe, Bernice Vincent, Murray Favro, Tony Urquhart, Robert Fones, Kim Ondaatje), film (Chambers, Keewatin Dewdney), poetry (James Reaney, Colleen Thibadeau, Michael Ondaatje), theatre (Rae Davies, Reaney), and criticism (Curnoe’s journal *Region*, Reaney’s journal *Alphabet*). Most of these artists congregated in a historic but dilapidated section of the downtown that became synonymous with their work, as Robert Fones recalls:

What is hard to imagine now is how compact the London art scene of the 1960s was. Most of the artists’ studios, art galleries, art centres and stores where artists could buy supplies were located within eight city blocks bounded by Queen’s Avenue on the north and King Street on the south, Ridout Street on the west and Wellington Street on the east.... The city seemed continually animated by exhibitions, poetry readings, films and musical performances at 20/20 Gallery, plays at Alpha Centre, films at the London Public Library, new issues of *20 Cents Magazine*, drugs, Love-Ins, concerts, The Nihilist Spasm Band at the York Hotel, and the latest albums from British groups like the Beatles and The Rolling Stones at Bluebird Music.... Artists frequently visited each other’s studios to talk about art and to keep in touch with what everyone was doing in their work. (“London” 36)

This scene was also circumscribed temporally because it struggled to survive the destruction of the artists’ neighbourhood by the corporate and government monoliths that now dominate the downtown: “This close-knit community remained intact until the city launched a process of so-called Urban Renewal in 1971.... Curnoe prophetically asked in his 1969 São Paulo catalogue: ‘Can one’s sense of place survive the physical destruction of that place[?]’” (Fones, “London” 36-37). The spirit of this arts community lives on in the Forest City Gallery

(1973-), now located south of the downtown and one of the oldest artist-run galleries in Canada (“FCG”). However, urban “renewal” dispersed the arts scene that the National Gallery of Canada once celebrated with the exhibition *The Heart of London* in 1968. The destruction of the artists’ studios also made prophetic the allegorical dimension of Chambers’ film, *The Hart of London* (1968), which comments on the fate of the artist in a puritan society through a montage of footage of a stray deer hunted down by police. In this sense, Bowering’s sojourn in London was timely because it brought him into contact with a group of artists in the midst of a passionate debate about the role of the arts in society. Although Bowering felt radically out of place in the cultural and physical geography of Southwestern Ontario, his experiences in London made him reflect on *TISH* and the different means of producing community through art: “I do remember the eager hubbub of those London, Ontario regionalists, their homemade art galleries, ironic picnics, theatre workshops, their gladsome business. They *gathered*. What are you doing, I kept thinking all the year I was among them” (Bowering “Reaney’s” 52). Bowering struggled to write poetry in 1966 because most of his early writing evokes a sense of place, but after 1966 his writing begins to reflect the historical, material, and genealogical concerns of the London artists, especially in book-length works such as *Autobiology* (1972) and *A Short Sad Book* (1977; see Kröller).

Residual evidence of Bowering’s London experience can be found in the cover images of his books, such as *Particular Accidents* (1977), which uses a detail of a painting by Chambers, and *A Short Sad Book*, which features a drawing by Curnoe. Bowering also makes the London influence explicit in the dedications of poems such as “In the Heart of Jewish Montreal (for Curnoe etc)” from *The Concrete Island* (1977), while Curnoe’s visit to the Bowerings in Montreal yielded a series of collages with names such as *Bowering Westmount #5* (Milroy 40-41). These artworks are gestures of friendship, an artistic gift exchange, and not simply attempts by an emerging artist (Bowering) to acquire cultural capital by connecting his name to more established ones (Curnoe, Chambers), although that is part of Bowering’s name-dropping strategy. Bowering’s long poem *Curious* (1973)—which consists of a series of poetic homages to authors Bowering has known in a style that parodies the authors’ works—demonstrates that his social networking is partly an ongoing study in literary composition and in the formation of artistic communities. The homages in *Curious* include an element of criticism that helps Bowering to

differentiate his work from that of his peers. Hence the poem "James Reaney" in *Curious* belongs to a series of critical meditations on Reaney and the aesthetics of "the local" that extends from "Why James Reaney is a Better Poet: (1) than any Northrop Frye poet, (2) than he used to be" (1968) to "Reaney's Region" (1982) to "Off Their Map" (2005). In short, Reaney's regionalism became a touchstone in Bowering's ongoing definition of his own sense of place.

The most profound London influence on Bowering is the regionalist art of Greg Curnoe whose "conception of regionalism, the notion of making art out of a passionate loyalty to one's immediate surroundings and community and not in slavish imitation of international styles, would be his most enduring legacy to Canadian art. By staying close to the nitty-gritty particulars of everyday life, you could develop an art of enduring significance" (Milroy 34). Bowering initially rejected the regionalism of the London artists, which he considered "the performance of a social conscience" ("Reaney" 40) that restricted individual expression because "loyalty" to one's surroundings implied subservience to the power structures that gave rise to local traditions (see also Davey). However Curnoe, as co-founder of the Nihilist Party of Canada as well as *Region* magazine (1961-90) and the Region Gallery (1962-63), had a much more anarchic take on local, regional, and national aesthetics than Reaney did, and Curnoe's challenges to artistic and political convention offset his devotion to place in a manner that appealed to Bowering.

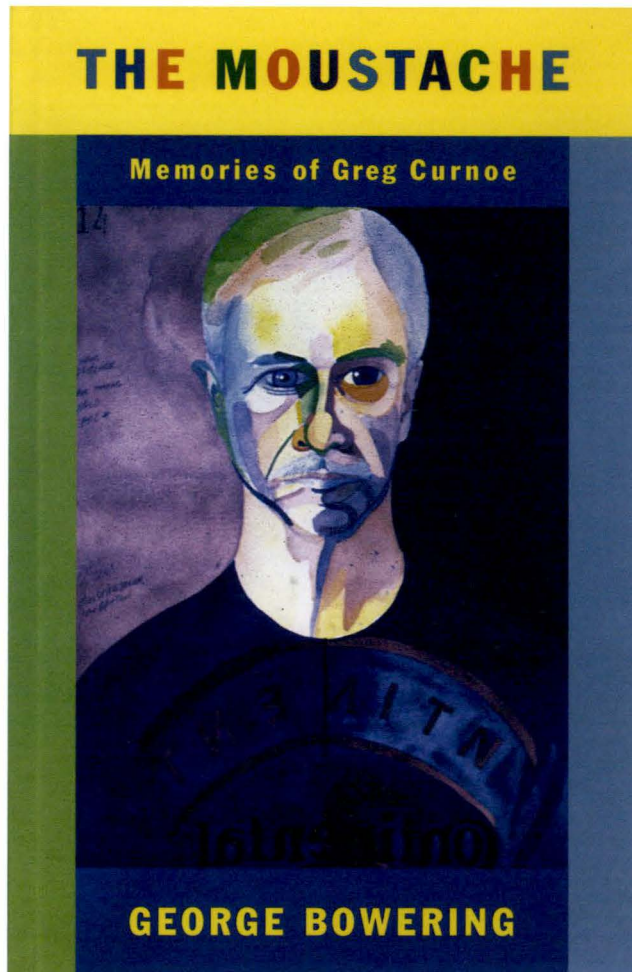
Appropriately, *The Moustache* is a mixture of elegy and satire, regionalist recollections and *TISH*-inspired teasing, that reflects the mixed experiences of Bowering's life but offers no solutions to the ideological questions that preoccupy him. Bowering recalls in his preface to *The Moustache* that "[t]he day after Greg's death, sitting in Frank Davey's house in London, ON, before I knew what I was doing, I wrote the first entry in this 'I Remember book'" (n.p.). *The Moustache* consists of a series of discrete recollections about Curnoe, each beginning with the phrase "I remember," isolated on individual pages without transitional material. Bowering explains in his preface that *The Moustache* takes as its model Curnoe's *Drawer Full of Stuff* (Bowering, "Preface" n.p.). This 1961 sculpture from Curnoe's Dada-inspired work was the piece chosen in the "catalogue for the 1982 Curnoe retrospective at the National Gallery...as an emblem of Curnoe's work as a whole.... The items collected in the drawer—bus tickets, a dinky toy, a table

spoon, Sunlight soap, a double socket with plug, a bicycle chain, and others—are fragments of everyday life, but, assembled in a frame, they are granted exceptional status” (Kröller 55). These items are the detritus of crucial phases and places in Curnoe’s life, as Milroy observes: “At twenty-five, Curnoe was attempting a radical rethinking of self-portraiture, creating a systematic sampler of all the places that had shaped him, a kind of sculptural compost of his material world. True to form, he included a numbered index of the drawer’s contents, fastidiously itemizing each object and its highly personal provenance” (28). Bowering mimics Curnoe’s “sculptural compost” in his writing and the poet creates a portrait of Curnoe through a series of discrete recollections about seemingly inconsequential moments. Bowering’s portrait of Curnoe, made of ephemera in the face of oblivion, thus complements the painted self-portrait by Curnoe on the front cover of *The Moustache*, the photograph of Bowering and Curnoe on the back cover, and the snapshots interspersed throughout the book.

Less explicitly, Bowering’s choice of title and his recollection concerning “Greg’s face collages” (*Moustache* 65) allude to a series of collages that Curnoe produced in the mid- to late-sixties (Portis 30-3), which used a “cutout” frame in the shape of a giant moustache. The moustaches could be combined with other cutouts of eyes, noses, ears, penises, and ties to create a portrait of an artist “whose own moustache was his signature feature” (Fones “Suspended” 54; Portis 56). Inside these cutouts are non-figurative collages made from paper ephemera that Curnoe collected from garbage bins, pockets, and other corners of his quotidian life, such that his self-portrait arose from the material culture that supported him, in particular the paper labels of local merchandise that was being replaced in the 1960s by the plastic wrapping of mass-produced products from malls and supermarkets (Fones “London” 37). By treating memories like objects on display and creating a portrait of Curnoe from seemingly insignificant details, Bowering pays homage to Curnoe in the artist’s own style while highlighting the intersection of print culture and the visual arts in both artists’ work. Bowering’s recollections in *The Moustache* thus underscore how collectives and artistic forms of collecting have played crucial roles in his formation as a writer.

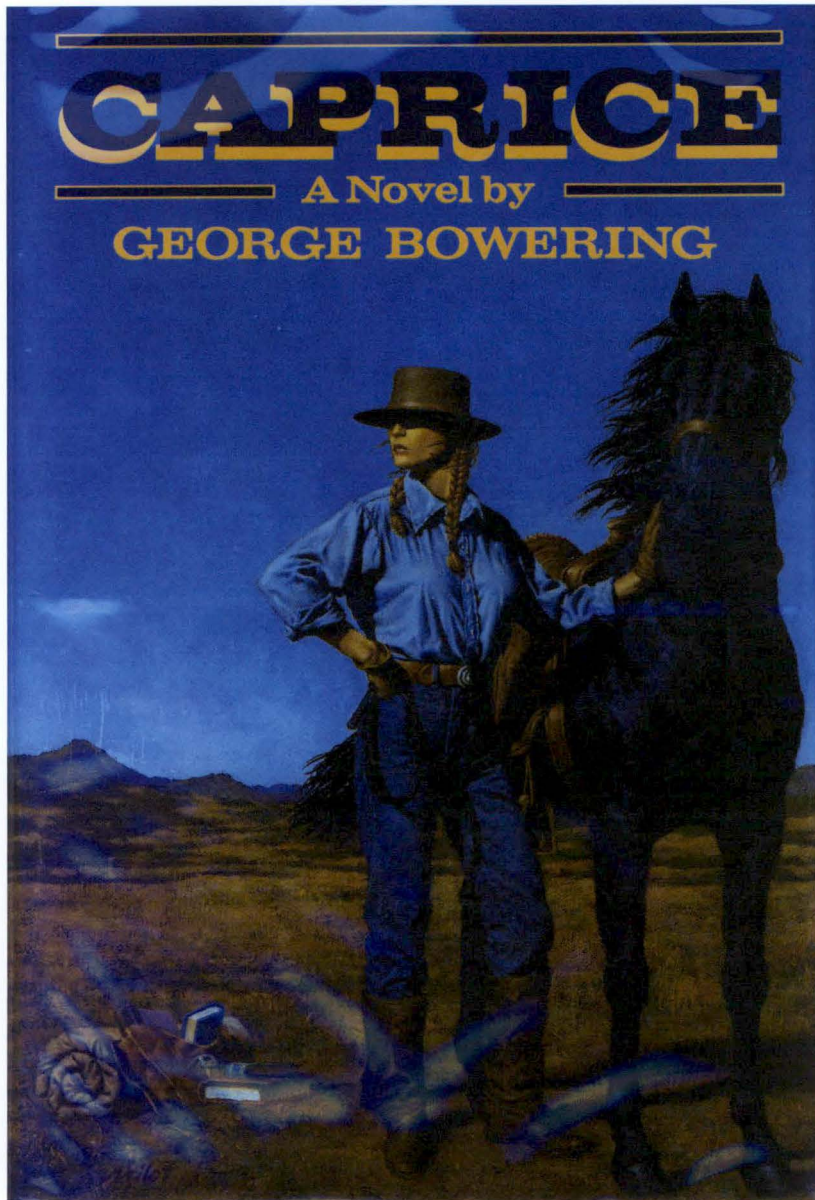
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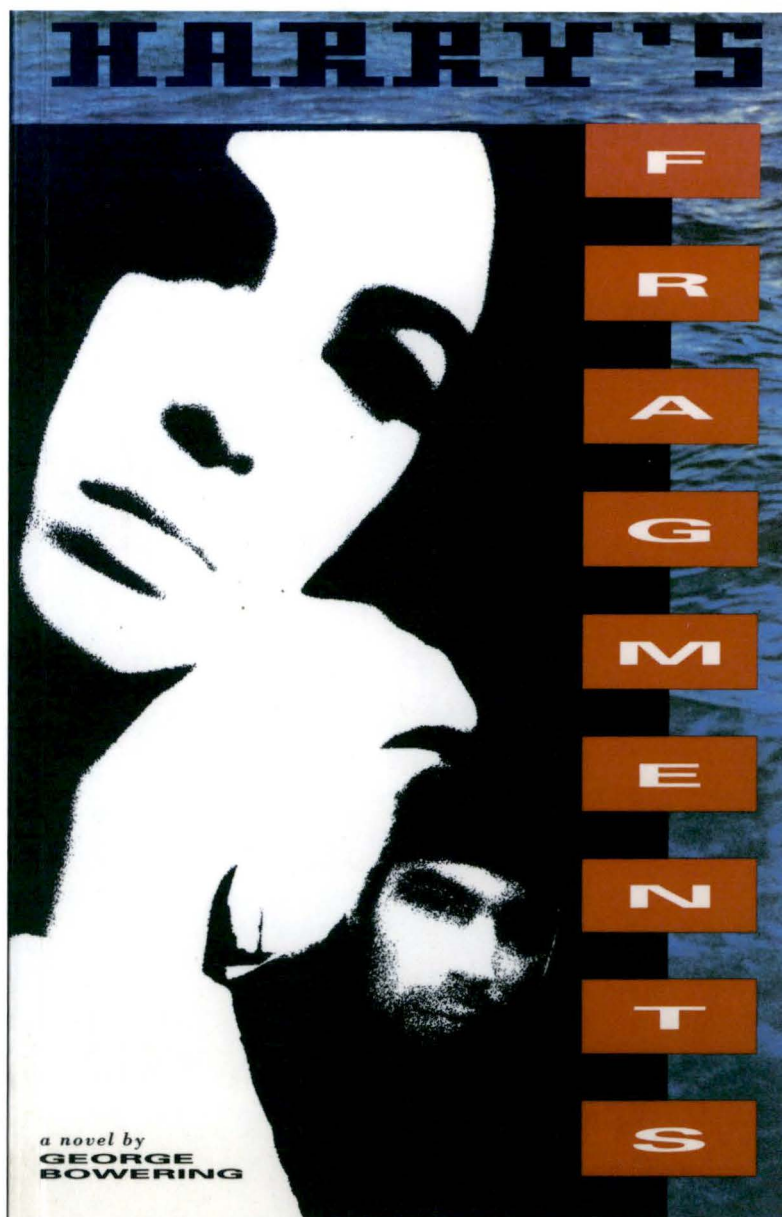
The Moustache: Memories of Greg Curnoe
(Toronto: Coach House, 1993)

"This is Canadian poet and author George Bowering's memoir of his friend and compatriot, the painter Greg Curnoe, who died in a road accident in 1992. The two were friends for almost 30 years. Until 24 hours ago, I had heard of neither. I picked this book up for a few pennies at the literary equivalent of the last chance saloon—a vast line of shelves outside a second hand bookshop in Hay-on-Wye on the England-Wales border. Having read a quarter of it before even paying, I went back to my car, mesmerised, and finished the book before driving home. I now want to read as much as I can by this author and to see the works of his subject. Bowering chooses not to give us the written equivalent of a photograph, but rather that of a briefly and deftly-made sketch—a sketch which is all the more effective because of precisely that brevity and deftness. Each page contains a single memory. It might be a memory of an art installation, a poetry reading, a strange dream, a meal, a car journey, a television appearance, the two men and their families going on a day trip, or whatever... From what I can tell by browsing Amazon, Bowering is as deservedly well-known in his native land and the United States as he is undeservedly unknown here, even if this book is currently out of print on your side of the Atlantic. *The Moustache* is one of those pieces a person discovers and then feels the need to evangelize about. Which I suppose I just have" (Barrie Hudson, "a chance find which stunned me," Amazon.ca, July 26, 2000).



Caprice (Toronto and New York: Viking/Penguin, 1987, 1988)

“In order to create a Canadian western you had to do something that was not an American western. I had to have all the signs of an American western but there had to be irony—you had to turn them upside down. It’s filled with signs, but it’s filled with difference” (Miki 85).



Harry's Fragments: A Novel of International Puzzlement
(Toronto: Coach House, 1990)

"If you ask a novelist what is his favourite novel among those he has written and/or published, he will usually pick one that has pretty well eluded the notice of readers and/or critics. For me that novel would be either *A Short Sad Book* or, more likely, *Harry's Fragments*.... *Harry's Fragments* was composed with more constraints than any other writing I have done" (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 118).



Bowering in his study with the film crew for "George Bowering," *Canadian Literature (Author) Series*. Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, 1985.