Andrew Klobucar / SLOW LEARNER: An Interview with Peter Quartermain

Politically and culturally, the 1960s invoke significant transitions within the practice and theory of literary criticism. Postwar Vancouver writing maintained a unique relationship to the counterculture of that period and my conversation with Peter Quartermain, an important literary critic from that period, confirms how significant such history has been to Vancouver's overall cultural development. Peter began his work in Vancouver in 1962, the same year student protests began at Berkeley. In Vietnam, the U.S. had become embroiled in a significantly warmer Cold War, while at home civil rights issues became more and more visible as an expression of American political change. Moving to Canada from the Bay Area, Peter Quartermain took up the position of assistant professor at UBC to acquire what would become a life-long interest in contemporary experimental Anglo-American poetry. In the spring of 2003, for two afternoons following his residency at Capilano College, we talked about some of the decisions and events that have helped shape his cultural position and aesthetic. His many experiences, conversations, drinks, arguments, and debates with some of the most important, challenging writers and poets of this half of the last century summon an invaluable career in criticism, analysis, and, most importantly, contemplation. Very recently, such reflections have stirred an ever-growing and increasingly vital "autobiography-in-process," a work he has divided somewhat tellingly into three parts: "Dumb," "Dumber," and "Dumbest". In Peter's words, "I think 'Dumbest' ends at that point because you can't get more stupid than always trying to live inside other people's heads, doing what they expect you to do. You've gotta go your own way. Well, I must have been 35 or 36 by then. I'm a very late developer; I'm a very slow learner."

Which works mark the beginning of your critical interest in New American writing?

Well, interest anyway, I'm not sure how "critical." If it's a friend who's writing, you read the writing. So I read it. And some of it, of course, was just amazing. And Warren [Tallman] and I would go off for lunch in the second, third, and fourth years I was at UBC — and long after that, too — and we'd talk to each other. We'd have a beer over lunch. We'd already had three or four beers before lunch. And we'd talk. And 90 percent of the time we'd talk about poetry and we'd talk about poets we were reading; we'd talk about Creeley. We'd talk about Duncan; we'd talk about Olson. Olson I could not take. I could not get to Olson and Warren would say this, that, and the other about Olson, like how to read him, but I couldn't do it. Eventually it broke through. And Warren kept saying things like, you know, Creeley has a great ear. Well, I had no notion of what an ear was. But I then started reading them aloud to myself and I started noticing line breaks and stuff and there's an extraordinary delicacy to Creeley.

Were you writing on these poets?

One of the things people wanted to know of a beginning assistant professor is what you are working on. Well, I'd had this post-doc at the University of Pennsylvania, where I was working on this huge and elaborate project, which had to do with habits of exile and Europeanism in America and American writing and the patterns of that in various kinds of literary movements as the western move took place across the continent. And I was going to work all that out into this magnificent great opus . . . of course, it was all rubbish.

. . . Actually it sounds kind of interesting.

Well, when I look back on it, I realize that in some sense my whole career has been exploring a lot of those patterns which had to do with indigenous American poetics versus a postcolonial American poetics — whatever you want to call it. But just then, I started

teaching Williams and I looked at that and I thought, well, it's no good saying that I'm gonna write about "X" because there's nine million books on "X". And I certainly couldn't work on Hawthorne. I'd done my thesis on Hawthorne, but there's no way I could write [a book] about Hawthorne — there's just so much stuff, you know. I'd spend months and months getting the scholarship together. But nobody had written about Williams, so I said to the department, "I'm going to write about Williams." There was one book by Vivienne Koch then, but that was all. So I figured, if you're first on the scene, you can be wrong as hell and it doesn't matter. The point is, you're a pioneer; you'll still get tenure and all that.

Actually, I think it was kind of like an epiphany for me because you've got to live inside your own head. You can't live inside other people's heads, but I didn't *know* that. The whole pressure, of course, was to live in other people's heads, do what you think they wanted.

I mean we're talking about Duncan, talking about Olson, talking about Creeley, Whitehead, etc., etc. What if they're wrong? There is a world out there and we can know it. What I found objectionable about the whole intellectual atmosphere was that it was perpetually concerned about the truth value of everything. They had the truth about poetry. You'd read Yeats. You'd read Eliot. But then there's no Truth in there; I mean you can't tell what Eliot or Yeats is "actually" about — you can't possibly "know" what a poem *really* is. It was very slow learning for me that truth value was not a part of the educational process in that sense — in that notion of objective "rightness" and Truth. The belief that you could sort of step outside of discourse, you know, and decide that the truth is good and then go back into it happily and sort of carry on from there invites a deep insanity.

It seems that the department was strongly steeped in the New Criticism.

Well yes, absolutely. One might call it a fundamentalism. There's a righteousness attached to that notion of seeking the truth and that means that anyone who doesn't see it is not worthy to be considered at some point and that is a very frightening thought. And, of course, we're moving back into that kind of thinking in a significant way.

Just to keep talking about the luck I had in 1970 — and this was a very strange circumstance — Bob Jordan was hired to do a very difficult job two years earlier in 1968: to run a very unruly English department. It was the times of student unrest [and] the uprisings in Paris. He and I didn't get on in terms of administration or anything else, although I can tell you now I have a great deal more respect for him than I did then. I had just got tenure. One of the things Bob did was decide that since this was an English department, we really ought to have visiting poets come and do a residency. That was a pretty radical idea, actually. So he sent out a notice that he wanted to hire a poet, and could the department name some. And Keith Alldritt, bless his heart, said "Look, there's this Englishman named Basil Bunting and he's right now in California and he's free next year, why don't we invite him?" and so Jordan said "Why don't you write to Bunting and find out about him, see if we can get him." Bunting wrote back and said he'd love to come, but was committed to Newcastle University for the next two years. And then when the next two years came along, Bunting came to campus. And for some other reason — totally freaky, God only knows what it was — I was the contact man to look after Bunting when he arrived.

I thought it was your own interest in Bunting that would have brought him here.

I didn't know who he was. I mean, I sort of did since he was a friend of Pound's. And so he was coming, I read his work before he came and I thought, "Yeah, it's kind of an interesting poem." And then came this guy! It's 1970 and here's this seventy-year-old man (now, I've actually attained that age)! Anyway, there is Basil and he arrived and they had made, as usual, the most terrible of arrangements — as in none. He wouldn't get any money until he had been here a month. They had nowhere for him to live. So I got saddled with Basil, but I wrote to him and he said, "Well, find me an apartment that's nice and quiet," and I said I could do that, I suppose. So I had this list of three apartments. Housing was not hard in Vancouver then, and, so when he arrived, I could show him these apartments and he came and stayed with me and Carol — who was then my wife

— and he and Carol got on well and he and I got on well and he had no money, so I lent him some money — I had to borrow money to do it . . . but I lent him some money, so he could go out and buy himself some food! He had nothing!

He had arrived to start teaching in September and didn't have any money. You would if you were appointed in the ordinary way, because you got paid from July 31, so there would be a cheque waiting for you, but when he arrived, there was no cheque for him.

Why didn't Alldritt help out?

I think Keith was away that year. It was just pure accident I got asked. I was the only poetry person, I suppose, except for Warren but they weren't going to invite Warren because Warren was so far out in the next field, they never asked him to do anything. And Basil and I — we are also fellow Englishmen, that was a part of it, I guess. But I learned an incredible amount from those three people. It took me a long time to realize that Creeley was somebody from whom I had been learning for years and years without knowing it. With Duncan it was just straight: go, bang, right there! Basil — he just simply set out to teach me. He'd say, "listen to that; now listen to that." "That's Bach! That's Scarlatti! What's the difference?" Things like that.

How long did he stay?

He was here for one term. Then he went to Binghamton, New York State. He was pretty wretched there and wrote us a lot of letters. And then the following year I had my first leave, and since he was in Victoria for a year, he would come over every weekend, pretty well.

I'm curious as to what UBC thought of him?

Well, Reg Ingram,[1] who died some years ago now, was also one of those people who noticed Bunting. He noticed when *Briggflatts* came out there was a lot of publicity in places like the *Sunday Times* and he had heard about Bunting, and Bunting published poems in the *Sunday Times* and he was publicized there (as a friend of Ezra

Pound's, if nothing else, but you know, *Briggflatts* made a hell of a splash when it came out in '66) and Reg said, "Hey, do you know about Basil Bunting? This is a friend of Pound's that I don't know about." And I didn't know about him either, so I heard him out. And Keith knew about him from the same source. So there was quite a lot of excitement actually in the English department among younger people. So one of the things they did, of course — almost as soon as he'd arrived — was to invite him to give a talk in the English department, which he did — we didn't have colloquia as such in those days. But he gave a talk in the Buchanan Penthouse one evening. Actually I didn't go: he told me not to. "You can just rescue me and take me for a drink afterwards. I don't want you to come. You know what I'm going to say. I'm going to tell them about the 'Poet's Point of View'." And he gave this talk about sound as the central organizing principle of all poetry — that the meaning doesn't matter at all, and everybody was offended. Like, they hated it! They thought he was nuts! Like the senior people just wondered, "Well, what is he going to be telling the students?" And so on, and so on, and so on . . . Knowing how Basil was, he was certainly not too tactful, so that when people would say things like: "Well, don't you really think that people should blah, blah, blah or what about critical work? Don't you think criticism has an important part to play in the understanding of . . ." He would say, "That's just a waste of time!" and dismiss it. So there was a lot of suspicion attached to what he was doing when they found out what he really thought. I mean, he would say other things that were equally true like, "You cannot teach creative writing, I mean, you can't. You can teach people all kinds of techniques and stuff to do, and that could be very helpful. But you cannot teach people to *imagine*. If they have a tin ear they're gonna have a tin ear until they discover they've got a tin ear."

Was creative writing a part of the English department?

No, it was separated by the time he got here. But when he went to Victoria the following year, creative writing was very much a part of the English department. In fact, he was brought over there to teach poetry. And one of the things he said in a newspaper interview was

that you cannot teach creative writing, and there was a terrific row over that. They thought it was just appalling. Robin Skelton had taken over just after he had come, and he gave a statement to the press that Bunting was there on false pretences and was a hypocrite because he thought creative writing could not be taught, when he had obviously accepted a post to teach creative writing. He should give back his money and go back home. I mean, talk about overreacting!

I'd like to return to your own critical interest in poetics, specifically Williams —perhaps with reference to some of your recent essays and correspondences.

My correspondence with various people! Yes, well, with respect to Williams and literary criticism, I often think of the spatial components in his work, not to mention the musical quality. And, of course, there's the humour . . . .

Were these specific components that you enjoyed?

What attracted me to Williams was, umm, well, I could *read* it. I mean, there was something so wonderfully open-ended and I guess there's a kind a glorious pointlessness about a poem like "So much depends / upon / a red wheel /barrow / glazed ..." So what! I mean, it's amazingly inconsequential. There was no challenge to the reader to puzzle out a secret, deep, and hidden meaning.

My whole training was to zoom in on the meaning and make sure you get the meaning right. And one thing with Williams was that he denounced that completely. You couldn't make those pretentious, twaddly kind of remarks that people could make about Yeats or about Auden or about Eliot, you know. I mean, when people taught *The Waste Land* and when I read *The Waste Land* — when I taught *The Waste Land* — I'd continually be getting (and I'd be totally dissatisfied with) matters of interpretation: What's going on in Eliot's head? What is happening here? What gave rise to this line here? What does he really mean by such and such and such . . . ? And all that stuff I'd always felt completely inadequate to in the poem. What I think I was trying to do was a kind of archaeological fallacy where I

would try to re-create in my own head what I thought might be going on in Eliot's head, which is of course totally absurd. That would be mad. But it seemed to me that that was the critical project in the hands of a lot of writers. This is the *real* meaning of *The Waste Land.*

And one of the things I remember thinking is, "Christ, I've got to write about something. Well, I like Hopkins, so I'll write an essay about Hopkins" and so I looked in the library and all the index catalogues and saw that there were something like 435 articles on "The Windhover" that had come out in the last seven years! You know, I thought, "Jesus God! Do I have to read all that crap before I can even start writing about the poem? What happened to the poem?" And of course, I thought I wouldn't be allowed to do it any other way because if I did, I'd probably get it wrong! Well, the great liberating thing about Williams was it was so inconsequential, you couldn't get it wrong. I mean of course there's so much you *could* get wrong, I'm not at all easy with readings of the poem to be about land reform in central China! But then there was hardly any criticism of Williams at that time so I'd say that what I read was hardly, um, helpful because, a great deal of the time, it rejected the poem completely. It said things like, not only is it really inconsequential, it's got no real structure. And, of course, I immediately started to think, well, of course it does. I looked at the syllable count, I looked at the line breaks — and that opened it up.

It was then I started realizing how sound was also a very great element in William's poetry. It's kind of a weird process actually, because a part of what I was doing was simply doing the thing for the boss. You know, you got to be working on something, so what are you working on. So I said I'll write on Williams because nobody was writing on Williams. I had read Vivien Koch's book.[2] Linda Wagner-Martin's book[3] came out shortly after I started. But I had a couple of books by Williams and I had the *Selected Poems* and I had a few magazines and what I discovered was that there were different versions of the poems and when I looked at the different versions, nearly all of them had to do with where the line breaks were. And that immediately told me or made me suspect first that one needs to find out which is the version that Williams most liked, that is, where is the definitive text? But also what is going on here has something to

do with the weighting of the voice . . . this is a problem with notation. I'm making myself sound more intelligent here than I was, but this is the sort of thing I was fumbling around with and then I discovered Williams's essay, "The American Idiom Again." It was on the inside back cover of an issue of *Agenda* (by discovered, I mean "read"). So I read Williams talking about Philip Freneau using music as a way of annotating the poem, notating the poem and how it looked on the page. And it was really quite clear that he was really concerned about that stationary appearance on the page as a way of registering the movement of the mind through the words or the movement of the words through the mind and the movement of the words through the voice. Something like that. But there was a dynamic there which wasn't just visual, it was something else. While all that was going on — this was in 1964, one year after Williams had died — *Pictures from Brueghel* came out. That was the one Williams book I bought other than the *Selected Poems*, and I was just knocked out by "To Daphne and Virginia" and "Asphodel that Greeny Flower" (which I thought was just the most amazing poem because it was so much the language of conversation). It was so much like someone just sitting down recording something, you know, just speaking his mind. And in that mind, of course, was a lot of feeling, a lot of passion. And then "Desert Music" was another of those poems. There's that amazing passage in "Desert Music" where he loses his sense of himself as a writer and then comes around and says "but I am a poet, I am, I am!!" — that great amazing, gratifying sense of self-affirmation.

The thing to remember about Williams in those days is that there was one book that had almost legendary status because it was completely impossible to get hold of, *Spring & All*. It was simply not around. It had never been re-printed. Eventually I think around 1967, Frontier Press brought out a pirated version. And another book that was not available was *Kora in Hell*. City Lights had brought out *Kora in Hell* but they'd left out the preface. And the *Selected Essays* of 1954 was out of print. It got back into print fairly soon, but these books were very, very hard to get hold of. Bookstores wouldn't keep him on their shelves. University libraries weren't very keen on having him around. UBC didn't have his *Selected Essays* at that time, as I recall. So what I was doing was I was busy getting all this material and

just faking it. One of the other things that opened up there was students reading Williams — liking him, talking about him. He was so accessible. I don't mean that Williams was a simple-minded poet and I don't mean that the poems were simple-minded. But Williams and his poems are dealing with materials at hand and the materials at hand are the materials in the poem and the materials of the language as they generate further activity in the poem. There's no thesis directing the poem, so that if the poem or the writing is discovering, as eventually I came to see that it is, then you, as reader, are also going through a discovery process. And what you discover is what Williams is also discovering and that is a range of possibilities as the poem goes from line to line to line to line.

Creeley was also amazing for that. So that when I started reading Creeley afterwards, I found that he too was using the line break, for example, as both a closing down, but also as an opening up at the same time, right? There's a kind of concluding at the end of the line, but then it opens up again like "So much depends/upon/a red wheel". Okay the red wheel is fine, but then bang there's the line break, and then you get "barrow" but what is that? Is "wheel" an adjective or a noun? Okay, so now you've got a half completed sentence, but where do you go from here? The whole dynamic is not giving information and withholding it, so much as seeing a range of possibilities and then narrowing those possibilities, but in the process of narrowing, you are opening up another set of possibilities . . . .

Would it be accurate to say that part of your interest in Williams was based on the opportunity to introduce or re-introduce a contemporary poet, while also immediately suggesting a new philosophy of language?

I'm not sure how immediate it was. We're talking about a process that took a year and a half at least. And because a part of it was I wasn't doing something to open up new territory, so much as trying to keep my job. I had to do something and this turned out to be quite congenial. And also it would impress all the scholars and bibliographers in the department because I had to track down all the texts! I mean, some of the variations in the texts were just mind blowing.

But it seems that Williams was able to teach you something that was quite exciting. It wasn't just practical.

The accessibility had a great deal to do with it. Again, I can only use the language that I would use now. It always seemed to me that Williams's poems were never predatory as far as he was concerned. I never had the feeling that Williams was trying to cajole me or manipulate me rhetorically into a particular position. What he was doing was engaging in some kind of, let's call it, "speech acts," though that's rather a dubious term, and inviting *me* to join him in that *act* because he was tracking down a series of perceptions or let's say the rhythm of perception, the ways in which one can (as opposed to one does) observe, say, become aware of, the features in a room, or the features of an idea or the features of a process. So you'd get, like in "To Waken an Old Lady," a whole series of pictures and the amazing thing about them was those images kept changing. One of the poems that I loved to teach was "By the road to the contagious hospital." It was Williams struggling towards articulation, but in the process of that struggling towards articulation, the poem was struggling toward articulation. So it was echoing the life of spring struggling towards articulation. There was something about coming to utterance that was in Williams's poetry which to all of us seemed absolutely engaging. And quite different from someone like Bunting with whom I also engaged, of course, in the 1970s. Because Bunting would say, "Just look; with that poem, it did exactly what I intended it to do." Basil had that sense that poems are under the complete control of the poet. But it was a lot of work for the poet to achieve that control. He used metric devices and he was always going on about the definitive version of the poem.

Whereas Williams, as it turned out, never had that sense of the definitive text of the poem because he kept re-writing it, changing it, re-thinking it, and so on. And I began to realize that when I came across those lines, "Write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive." What Williams was doing when people asked him for poems, I mean, I realized that these were the *Selected* poems, when New Directions said let's have these poems, he was just going through his filing cabinet and just pulling poems out of folders and

some were really old versions of the poems and some of them were quite recent versions of poems. And you'll find that a poem in the *Selected* was a version of the 1933 or 1934 *Collected*, but it had been revised since then into some other form or combined with a version in a journal. But, of course, you can't read it if it was in the *Collected* in the first place — those are pretty rare books — then it didn't matter anyway, you know? One version was as good as another. And so, there was this amazing sense that Williams didn't feel possessive about his poems.

These qualities: the constant modification, and the open-endedness have obviously influenced your own work. How did students respond to such ideas? How difficult was it to teach such qualities about the poem at UBC?

Well, there are two things there I think one has to be very careful about. One is that, as far as UBC itself is concerned, one of the great virtues of that place — and I hope it is still a virtue — is that, once you're in the classroom, it's nobody's business but yours what you do there. Which meant at some point that nobody knew what you were doing in the classroom. Well, I mean, at one point they might and would, if there were tons of complaints. If they had taken a course from you, let's say in modern poetry, and they come out knowing a hell of a lot about ancient Egypt but nothing about modern poetry? Then somebody's going to say something to you because they expect those students who come to their class to know about modern poetry, and here they are talking about Geb and the great stretch of Nut across the sky.

Generally speaking, nobody paid much attention to what you were doing. Although, obviously you did have to do certain things and you did have to meet certain requirements. So that's the first thing to notice. The second thing is that the audience that you had — well there's a double audience. One is, of course, your colleagues. Like most academics, we all have somewhat tunnel vision. I could really have a long and knowledgeable conversation with people about the novels of Henry Fielding, or Shakespeare, I suppose, or whatever it may be I'd been teaching, but the North American academic tradition was totally different from the English, from which

I came. So that you tended to gravitate towards people who shared your enthusiasms and who shared very often your own aesthetics. So I spent a lot of time with people like Warren Tallman.

There were some amazing people floating around, who had, as Warren Tallman said, drifted into my consciousness. I managed to teach in the 1960s a seminar on Williams and Zukofsky. I managed eventually to teach, I think it was in 1968, a seminar on Olson. I had no idea what Olson was doing. I had no idea at all. I just could not get Olson. But Ellen Tallman had a tape of Olson reading and that was enormously helpful because I could then start hearing the poem as Olson heard the poem. And we all learned together, a seminar trying to figure it out. That tape made a difference. But I would talk to students about this poetics and we were all nuts about this stuff and that led to all kinds of strange and interesting — and again, *open* spaces, *open* places. But generally speaking the English department as a whole — the academic community as a whole, shall we say — was extremely resistant to that.

I am curious about that since much of what you say about Williams has been properly institutionalized now.

Williams was very much outside the institution. What was being proposed, I think, in the whole personal poetic that attracted me so much was really a radical shift in the way we view the world and also in the nature of knowledge, and how that works, it was also a shift in . . . what term can I use . . . sensibility. I mean, I've written about this; a lot of my thinking on this comes from my reading of Duncan. It has to do with what *he* characterizes as the difference between masterpiece and testimony, and that shift in the poem towards testimony, which I found in Williams. It was so clearly there in Creeley. I found Creeley an absolutely terrifying person in some ways, not as an individual, but reading his poetry — I mean, I read *Island*, his novel and, my god, it just went straight into my psyche and all that indwelling anguish that informs the writing of that novel and a lot of his poetry — *For Love*, for example, so echoed the voice of my own uncertainties and anguishes and angsts and all the other things that young people (and I do still) cope with from time to time. I

found him very, very humbling to read. But, of course, I had to come back to it again and again because it was so accurate a register of a particular human condition, which first was extremely particular, which seems to me very, very important like it was *Creeley's* "human condition," but which secondly therefore opened up the particularity of my own condition. So it put me in touch in a very important way — I was going to say it put you in touch with yourself, but I don't think that's quite right. Rather, it made you trust your own self in your own situation.

Would you say that the work that you were reading had an effect on how you saw your own work as a professor? How much did it help you articulate your position within the institution? Did the institution appear different to you?

I think that there are two institutions involved. One is the actual place in which you work and the other one is the idea of the university or college or an education — that larger institution to which one presumably professes loyalty, or at least I do.

To go back to the question, it did both of those things. It made me re-think my relationship to the institution. One of the great ironies, I suppose, is that Williams really turned me on. The most immediate and lasting effect it had on me was that it taught me you *shouldn't* write about poetry. You should not *do* that — writing about poems is ridiculous. As Bob Perelman put it some years later, "Any statement about a poem is more general than the poem." And the poem has to do with specifics and particularities. But the institutions for which I was working — whichever one you care to talk about — always insisted of course that you make generalities, that you acquire, you achieve some level of theorization or of general observation about the shape and course of American culture or about the shape of the canon or about someone's importance. And those questions became for me meaningless and they are still meaningless to me in some way. I think it is a total and complete and utter waste of time to ask if so and so is a better writer than so and so, where does so and so fit into the canon? It's interesting to ask if someone fits into a history, if by that history you mean something like gossip. Pound and Williams? How do Williams and Zukofsky and Oppen fit in their

conversations? Did they read each other? Because that's conversation. How did they work around that whole business, whatever that whole business is? How did Oppen stay Oppen? How does Williams stay Williams? How does Zukofsky stay Zukofsky, them reading each other's work, talking to each other? Well those aren't traditional critical questions. Or at least, not as they seemed to me. And the work that got generated out of these conversations seemed tremendously important. Think of, for example — just simply to jump back several generations or more — Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy, that little triangle; D.H. Lawrence would talk to H.D. and Aldington; and gosh, Olson, Duncan, Creeley, and Blaser, I mean these were my contemporaries, I mean they were in the sense that they were alive and around and so on.

There were things I was obliged to teach because there was a canonical thing involved. I mean, if you teach modern American poetry you cannot ignore Robert Frost. So I had to sort out what I thought of Robert Frost. And it was fascinating to find out what I thought about Robert Frost because I thought he was terrible. So I had find out ways to articulate that for the class in conversation in the classroom — and I was quite ruthless about manipulating people, I realize now. I didn't realize it at the time — I changed my mind about Frost eventually, I mean, he did write some good poems, but precious few. And ninety percent of the time, it seems to me, Frost ran away from the poem, by bending and forcing it where he wanted it to go, rather than by following where the poem wanted to go. In some poems, you can really see, very clearly, where that shift occurs.

And that conflict is interesting . . .

That's fascinating to me, except I don't really want to write about Frost. For instance "After Apple Picking" seems to me a classic type of poem that Frost runs away from, but then so is "Birches", which I think is one of his disgusting, "barfy" poems. Or "The Road Not Taken." Except "The Road Not Taken" never really got to that level in the text where he had to run away from it. I mean that's just a little essay, it's basically discursive. But over and over Frost turns his back on the poem — as soon as something he can't control starts

happening in the poem, he turns his back on it. There's this central evasion going on. I can't say Williams never evaded. But when Williams evaded, he mostly circled around something. When he made a poem like "Asphodel" he may be circling but the circling becomes part of it, he keeps coming back to it because he cannot get away from it. He knows he has got to come back to it and the poem enables him to get back to it because he keeps writing the poem. He's forced to write the poem — which is a totally different kind of writing from those poets I didn't want to teach. And there were some poets I just could not get on with. I mean, it took years and years and years and years before I could read Wallace Stevens, whom I now think is a terrific poet. I don't read him very often, though.

This may not be a fair question, but you talked previously about a shift in sensibility or a shift in knowledge. But this shift in sensibility was fairly evident in more than just poetry — wasn't it a wider cultural attitude?

The more involved I got with that whole poetics, the more anguished I became because I was having to . . . well, there was a lot of guilt involved because I was turning my back on my whole tradition, my whole training, that is, my intellectual tradition, my education, where I really had thoroughly been taught. Part of *Growing Dumb* [the autobiographical project] has to do with what I was being taught. What I was being taught was obedience. Don't rock the boat. This is the nature of the world. This is what truth is; this is what knowledge is. This is how gentlemen should behave in the world. This is the place in which certain things happen and this is the place where certain other things happen. It was that kind of ordered cosmos in that way.

A lot of the things that I was reading from — Williams and Duncan — they were so exciting and exhilarating. Duncan's personality was just a knock-out. I mean, God, Duncan could talk for . . . well, he was a great monologist. I remember one session, a Saturday, he started at ten in the morning and he didn't finish until six at night. He went right through, you know. And every so often somebody would say something and he would just start all over again.

It was really like being inside a Waring blender. It was incredible. But it was also profoundly disorienting.

Well, being in a blender would be.

Yeah, exactly. And so I'd come out and at some point I was just being shaken to the core. And later — I don't know how much later — I started reading other writers. Like Gertrude Stein — I mean, God, what a knock-out her writing is because she was doing the same thing and when I discovered — is it in one of the *Narration* lectures? — "Knowledge is the thing you know and how can you know more than you do know," well, that just knocked me out because it removed knowledge from the library and it put it slam into the realm of experience. Like what you know is, of course, what you know now. But what I know now isn't necessarily what I know tomorrow or yesterday or even five minutes from now. Because what you know is also in some sense what you are conscious of or what you can draw on. One of the things I realized was that it is very, very difficult to get in touch with whatever it is that you think of as knowledge or memory but is tucked away inside your psyche or your mind or whatever. We all know a great deal more about music than we think we know, so that Stein's comment is very, very complicated and far-reaching in many ways. But the knowledge that the institution kept pushing was really a kind of rote knowledge that you'd have to have *instant* access to; it's on the level of what I think of now as information, and it's, well, I thought that was totally absurd. When I say the institution did this, I mean, for example, at UBC for the M.A., before you could write your M.A. thesis you had to do what was called the Reading List exam. And it was an absolutely monstrous examination which was divided into two parts: factual questions and essays. And the factual questions were things like: "What is the date of 'Pippa Passes'?" "Identify the following quotations." And there were set books, but the set books were insane because there were about 100 of them and you only had a three-hour shot at this exam and you could take it and fail it. But if you failed it a second time you were out of the program.

Well, I feel lucky I never had to take anything like that. I mean my education was after the 1960s.

Well, if I had to do that . . . ! I mean, I couldn't believe it. I never had to do anything like that in my life because it was so insane. It was totally insane. How was the list compiled? Well, you get a committee of about eight people and they all have their own little period of specialization. And they'd say, "Well you've got to have this and you've got to have this." And then they'd say, no, no, this is far too big, we've got to prune that and they'd go back and prune it and it would come back twice as long. And, of course, if you weren't on that committee, certain things never appeared on that list. Ever! So you got a student interested in twentieth-century writing who's doing a reading examination and there's nothing since Yeats! There's *nothing*. So what is the point of this exam, anyway? This is the kind of knowledge the institution was pushing, pushing, pushing. And at the same time, it was invoked here as the university still invokes the notion that we are extending the bounds of human knowledge, which is such a piece of "garbage-y" rhetoric. I mean it is a totally meaningless statement. Information is not knowledge. Knowledge does not exist out there. It's like, reality is not out there. It's in here. I mean, it's a *relationship*, of course.

Would you say it's more about an interest in cultural standards?

Absolutely. And my anguish was such that, I mean, it really was great agony. I would be awake at night. I started drinking and it all had to do with simply no longer trusting to know what I was doing. And having to fight through all that stuff again. Because what I thought I knew was clearly just garbage. I had to find some other way to be. In a sense, it undermined my authenticity because I was identifying myself, that is, gaining my identity out of an institution and at the same time I was reading books that provided a new kind of identity and responsiveness to my work that at the same time undid that identity.

It certainly is undermining your literacy and to see that connection between literacy and identity is a disorienting experience.

Yes. What did you care what identity was because of course I know who I am.

That's a great way of putting it. The disorientation aspect is fascinating.

You see, the thing that was also going on at that time, though we weren't aware of it, was the collapse of empires, the whole reassertion of ex-colonial, or postcolonial (I hate these words) identitarian politics, whatever you want to call it, which later led to quite severe battles in English departments over what kind of prose is acceptable from students. So that if we had a student who came from, say, Trinidad — or from, we had a Goanese student, for example, who learned English as her first language. She spoke English all her life, but she still had to learn OxBridge. She had to throw out her whole syntax and just start all over again because without that she was not demonstrating any intelligence. Which is a very curious kind of prejudice. And I assume that it all started, that is the one thing I recognized that it was working on the same kind of prejudice that I had. I was amazed — this is part of my education at UBC: when we hired a guy in English and told him to get his Ph.D., who got a job as a sessional lecturer, who was interested in the poetry of Arthur Clough and he happened to have a really pronounced Lancashire accent. And he was absolutely brilliant; he was wonderful. And he just dropped English literature and went into linguistics, got his Ph.D. I'm talking about Fred Bowers, right? And he then became a very good teacher of linguistics, history of languages, and so on. And I could not . . . for months I had enormous difficulty recognizing that he was bright because he had an accent because I had been brought up to believe that if you didn't speak proper English, you didn't have a proper mind, maybe didn't have a mind at all! Well those kind of beliefs die out, but you see how hard they die when you look at the careers of people who did come into university and who very often were very close to failing their candidacy exams

because they were using idiomatic expressions that were not "proper" English. It was something else. So people were getting totally turned off. I mean it's a class prejudice. I read accent as a class marker.

How important were the Tallmans?

Absolutely, absolutely essential! I spent nearly all my time with the Tallmans and we'd sit and we'd drink and we'd sit and we'd talk and we'd drink and we'd talk. My wife and I would go to his house for parties because that's where the lives and the interest was. Ellen just knew everybody. Amazing intelligence and warm and sympathetic person. They took me a hell of a lot more seriously than I took myself. Warren used to say, "Peter, you know, one of these days you are going to come into your intelligence." I'm not sure I ever did, but the thing about that was that it immediately set up a relationship between me and my own sense of myself, which is quite different. He was totally accepting of me. I didn't have to prove anything. I didn't have to have a meaning. He never questioned, he never doubted your meaning at all because you are what you are, right? What is the meaning of life? What an insane question. Life is about life. The purpose of life is to stay alive. That's a very, very hard lesson to learn.

Notes

[1] Reginald W. Ingram (1930-89), scholar of early British theatre, author of *Coventry* (UTP, 1981).
[2] *William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, 1950).
[3] *The Poems of William Carlos Williams: A Critical Study* (Wesleyan UP, 1964).