

BARRY MCKINNON / Interview with George Stanley (1998):

Excerpts

BARRY MCKINNON: I was thinking this morning that there is a point where a young person becomes a writer or calls himself a poet. Do you remember when that happened with you?

GEORGE STANLEY: I can remember when I started writing poetry, but I cannot remember when I started calling myself a poet.... I was one year at the University of San Francisco and I know I wrote there because my poems were published in the University of San Francisco literary magazine, and then at Salt Lake City. I was at the University of Utah and it's interesting that—this is before North Beach—this is 1952 so it's before the beatnik era began and so going to Salt Lake City—which is one of the most repressive cities in America, from San Francisco which is one of the most liberal—that when I got to Salt Lake City I found myself in the counter culture for the first time because anyone who was not a Mormon was in the counter culture. So the counter culture consisted of Catholics and Anglicans as well as gays and lesbians and communists and poets—anyone who was not part of the Mormon establishment—so there I met all these bohemians, that's the general term “bohemian types,” but isn't that paradoxical! I met them not in New York or San Francisco where I was born, but in Salt Lake City. So there I published some poems in a literary mag we started at the University of Utah which was called *Context* and then I stopped writing again. I went into the army and when I was in Mammoth Spring Arkansas living on separate rations in sort of like an auto court by the river working as an assistant poultry inspector—I was very lonely. I started writing poetry again there... then I came back to San Francisco after I was out of the army and I went to the University of California Berkeley....

BM: [Your high school English teacher] Ned Doyle did something to your curiosity in terms of going past California Street.

GS: Well to go north of California Street meant to break away from my family.

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BM: And once you do that, of course, at that age, most young writers have to find the teachers or connections.

GS: Yes, so I found the teacher—Spicer.

BM: I remember reading that he had a pretty odd and sophisticated test before a student could take his poetry workshop.

GS: He did and I don't remember much about it; it's all in some of that Spicer material. It was a test made up of questions about literature, history, and philosophy and I met him later after the workshop had started. I got into the workshop without taking the test, but later on I saw a copy of the test and—I was very much of a—shall I say, an academic kind of intellectual kid and I would have answered the test quite straightforwardly and to display my...

BM: Erudition?

GS: My erudition, yeah, and if that had happened then I would not have gotten into the workshop because the test was to screen out people who could pass it or who would take it seriously or if you were so...

BM: I think poets *always* have to fail the test!

GS: Or if you were someone like Ebbe Borregaard then you would just crumple the whole thing up into a wad of paper and say, "I'm not going to do any of this bullshit!" and then you would get into the workshop.

BM: The test is the test! What were your first feelings about Spicer?

GS: I admired him immensely and got drawn in by Spicer into these wars that he would have with Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser where I was always on the wrong side, the losing side.

BM: Was there some kind of test of loyalties that had a dimension in poetic thinking? Fights over theoretical matters?

GS: Well, yes, there were fights over... I can't remember. I mean one time I know that Spicer was accusing Duncan of having sold out to New York, and another time he was accusing him of having too many Egyptian gods in his poems and these things were

very very serious to Spicer. Robin would tend to feel aggrieved and Duncan would simply dismiss the whole thing and joke about it, but for Spicer these were deadly serious issues. Spicer wrote about the human crisis in one of his poems. I mean, Spicer really did see what was happening to our species.

BM: You see amazing risks in his lines, a kind of seriousness—his life was on the line.

GS: Yes, with every poem. Once we had a poetry meeting and he read some poems, and I think it was Duncan who said, “Well Jack those are pretty good poems, typical Jack Spicer poems” and he immediately wadded the whole thing up and threw it in the waste basket, and Joanne Kyger went to grab them out of the waste basket and said, “Jack these are beautiful poems, don’t throw them away” ... but Jack would do that. The least hint that he was doing anything that would be immoral—of course he hated the whole concept of morals so that wouldn’t be the word he would use—something “whorish,” that was a word he would use, anything that was whorish that was in some ways selling out to the English Department of the soul or to New York, he would say, “alright that’s it, destroy that.”

BM: So he was tapped into some notion of the purity of the act of writing poetry?

GS: Yeah, and he came to believe that there were forces outside the poem, outside our universe perhaps that were giving him poems. It’s important that he did not identify those with language.

BM: No, his source, he might say, was the radio, or the Martians.

GS: And various people such as Creeley had said something about the poem coming from language—I believe Creeley said that at one point and Spicer rejected that. The language is just the furniture in the room. But this is all on record in some interview that Spicer did—the Vancouver Lectures....

BM: You have many lines that stick with me, lines like “going to the store/ for a pack of cigarettes, going to Prince George.”

GS: The first poem in *Mountains & Air*—“Light up the world with your faith.”

BM: I see those specific details that I really like in your poems, but you also manage

to get lines that have meanings that are very important—meanings that lift out of all those details.

GS: Well that poem I really like. “Mountains & Air” is now 10 or 12 years back and it seems to me that if we were talking about our greatest hits—that’s one of my greatest hits. I go back and I still like that poem. I like the way it is just filled with all kinds of random stuff like Julia Child, or that pack of cigarettes, or the pictures of the graduating class of Prince Rupert Senior Secondary hanging on the wall or the other pack of cigarettes that the pilot holds up and says, “okay smoke.” It is so filled with that random stuff that it is in a way like the world untouched by the so-called creative mind. So the great stuff in those poems just comes out unexpectedly without any rhetorical preparation, and it goes away just as quickly and the whole poem at the end seems to have been almost a kind of a natural event rather than a contrived structure.... The poem starts in Terrace, not knowing why I’m there because it was one of the biggest changes in my life to suddenly be in Terrace...

BM: There is a kind of wonderment about the place in the poem.

GS: That poem does express that sort of wonderment about the place—about the bears, about planes, the mountains.

BM: But not in any, as you say, in an extended narrative about the place.

GS: Well the narrative is implied. The narrative is fragmentary. Sharon Thesen paid me the greatest compliment when she wrote this in an essay—that that poem reminds her of David Hockney, David Hockney’s great art. And David Hockney has that wonderful quality of things not having taken any particular effort to have come into the forms they are.

BM: I think that’s a real secret to poetry. No matter how hard you might work at it—and maybe it’s part of that detachment you’re speaking of too—you want the poem to float by without any screaming, or devices to gain attention—but to be real among other things. Your work does that.

GS: So that’s at a time which was very—a lot of change going on in my life. I wrote a lot of those poems in those little light planes in a sense to control my anxiety about the plane.

BM: Many of your poems mention airplanes.

GS: That's true—that's another characteristic of my poems—a lot of them are involved in some form of transportation. Those poems came almost accidentally and they do retain that kind of accidental quality which paradoxically gives them a kind of a permanent value, but the other side of it is that when you hook onto a poem like a big fish and it's something that you have to struggle with—and you may struggle with it for months and months before finally realizing there isn't any poem there at all, or the other side of it, realizing, yes, there is a poem and it's taken me 6 months of work and it'll take another 6 months of work and all the time in putting all that work in—a great deal of that work is to erase any evidence of the work, so as to kind of fake that quality of having come into the world without any anticipation.

BM: Or preconceptions.

GS: Or preconception, yeah. As if it just occurred to me, except I've been working on it for 9 months and often it does. Cynthia Flood was telling us about W. D. Valgardson. He had been working on a story and he'd done something like 19 drafts of this story and on the 19th draft it occurred to him that he didn't need the first 7 pages, and that sort of thing will happen too in poetry. I remember sitting on the beach at Aquatic Park with Spicer and I was writing a poem in a notebook and I erased a line and put another line in its place. Spicer was watching me and Spicer said, "George always has to put another line in when he erases a line"—but of course, I've gotten beyond that. I'm willing right now to say I'm working on say a 3-page poem and say I don't need the last page or the first page, but I may not realize that till after 19 drafts of the poem. So it can come either way. It can come just unexpectedly—a wonderful poem—or you can spend 6 months working on something that turns out not to be a poem at all, and finally with a great expression of relief—throw it all away....

BM: I was going to ask you, since we're dealing with biography, about your initial connection with Canada.

GS: ... I had no concept of Canada. I thought of Vancouver as being someplace like Denver. The fact that it was in Canada was less important than the fact that they both ended with the same syllable. So I came up here and I got stuck here—that's basically what happened. I ran out of money. I spent the small amount of money I

had. I went on a trip to Europe with Scott Watson and then I came back here and I started working for Duthie's and then I started working for *The Grape* which was an underground newspaper, and then I worked on Opportunity for Youth (OFY) grants with New Star Books and eventually I ran out of money, then I had to go to work loading trucks for CP transport.

BM: Out of that experience at CP you wrote the poem, "Donatello's David."

GS: "Donatello's David," yeah.

BM: ... Just after "Donatello's David" there is another poem about Vancouver—full of great humorous diction. I remember the line—"a 'passel of assholes'"—and Vancouver as a bourgeois gray city.

GS: That poem is "Vancouver in April." I think it was April '75—an attempt to imitate Patrick Kavanagh's...

BM: Yeah, it says "after Kavanagh." "It's pretty shitty / living in a protestant city / and my heart too bleak for self pity."

GS: The idea is terza rima—writing in triplets with funny rhymes. That's what Kavanagh did in a poem called "A Summer Morning Walk." Anyway, to finish that one thing about Canada, I realized that I had become a Canadian and so then I went and applied for citizenship which many of my American friends at that time had not yet done, but I thought it was something I should do so that when the judge asked me, "Why are you taking out citizenship?" I said because I realize I've become a Canadian, I want to formalize the relationship and then he asked me which provinces had joined confederation in what years—and I knew all that—passed the test—so that's how I became a Canadian, but the further irony, the historical irony is that I had come to Canada, come to Vancouver thinking it was just another American city like Denver. After being here and becoming a Canadian, I realized what all Canadians know: Canada is a vastly different country than America. But now that Canada—we were talking about this last night—Trudeau being the last Canadian—Trudeau, George Grant, Al Purdy—that Canada is no longer—it is no more. We're now all part of America because of the global village.

BM: Do you see your time in Terrace as a phase that's ending?

GS: Yes, I do. I see this whole Terrace period of time pretty objectively. Arriving in 1976, like I say, in that town, I just was becoming a Canadian and eventually I started teaching Canadian Literature. That's why I didn't get the job at Capilano College. I would have been at Cap College and never would have come to Terrace except that I failed the interview because I didn't know anything about Canadian Literature. So I began reading—of course I realized as the only English instructor at Northwest College I had to eventually offer a course in Canadian Literature, so I began reading it and I read Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and Margaret Laurence's Manawaka books which showed me what a Canadian small town was like and of course Terrace is an Ontario town because the people who founded it are from Ontario. Terrace was founded in 1911. There had been settlers there before, white settlers, but the town was started because of the mill to cut ties for the CN—whatever the CN was called then—the Grand Trunk Pacific—and the man who founded it, George Little, set up his mill to cut the ties and then by 1913 there was this enormous pile of tie ends, heap of tie ends, and someone thought it was a great idea to set this on fire—a day I think that was very much like the day of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. It was hot and windy—a great day to start a fire—and the resulting fire leaped the Skeena River twice and destroyed 70% of the usable timber within 3 miles of Terrace. So as a result of this, the city fathers then brought out all these saplings from Ontario and planted them along the streets of Terrace, so all over Terrace there are now 80 year old trees from Ontario of various kinds and it has the little straight streets and the main street that leads down to the lake, except it's a river, like in Leacock. So that's when I arrived. And as I began teaching I realized that here I am in the very world that Leacock and Laurence, and also Sinclair Ross in a starker way, describe (a town called Horizon in *As For Me and My House*) but then I realized it was changing: it was becoming something else, it was becoming what it is now—a terminal of the global village. So in that period I can see the whole transition from bourgeois society, which was based upon the main street, to what we have now based upon the mall. I can see it as a period in my understanding of society under capitalism and I can see it as a period in my understanding of what Canada was, and what Canada was is coming to an end, has come to an end and I can also see it, I guess, as the centre of my life in a way, my mature years, so to speak, spent in this activity of teaching which I hadn't done much of before.