

DANIEL BOUCHARD / Careless in Vancouver

Late in the serial poem *Vancouver* George Stanley instructs: “Write carelessly, but slowly” (73): a note to himself, a reminder really, as this dictum appears throughout the poem. “Slowly” suggests the kind of control that would allow one to compose a poem with forethought and a firm grasp on whatever material may come while writing, allowing one to be the shaper of image and sound and not someone stumbling clumsily through their own lines. However, the kind of method suggested by this sentence is antithetical to writing carefully: it is not “write carefully and slowly,” but in fact, don’t write carefully at all. Yet there are hints throughout the poem that this kind of “careless” writing can provide the best care possible, the kind of care one takes in craft. If so, this kind of care stands craft on its head. So what does he mean?

“Write carelessly, but slowly” is not the kind of adage to be seen above the desk of a composition instructor. The role of instructor is significant in the poem. In Book 1 William Carlos Williams is referred to as a “guide” and a student frets over not having followed directions properly during an examination (he didn’t double-space). Throughout *Vancouver* the poet is reading student papers and reading books of poetry, including another poet-instructor’s (Kenneth Koch’s) selection of poems by his schoolchildren-students (41). While riding on rapid transit through the city and catching a glimpse of faces “as if the set of the face belied the interior of the mind,” he is moved to reflect on pedagogy: “I could teach this to the young” (45). These are not just interruptions welcomed into the poem as a form of grounding or diversion but a central element of the poem’s structure. He cites Williams again, approvingly, in Book 8 as one who “would write / a long passage of poetry / interrupted only infrequently / by prose” (53–54).

Vancouver’s material is generally established with Book 1: public transportation, reading, teaching, description of the city, memory (“There is more than memory here”) (3) and provisional writing advice and techniques to be applied to the poem at hand. The writing advice—a kind of notes-to-self—are digressions and asides, reiterations and refocusing techniques that verbalize the writing process: “Oh, maybe that, yes” (3); “what about subject position? that revealed coyly, or just blurted out?” (4); “(careful, watch it!)” (4); “—yes, but don’t try to describe—feelings” (4, 5); and “trying

too hard to think” (6). With these self-correcting asides the path of disclosure is made navigable. To read *Vancouver* is very much to read the process of writing a serial poem. When choices or movement become difficult that difficulty is incorporated: “stuck stuck stuck what kind of feeling down in Woodward’s basement...” (6) and again, “Stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck the pub crawl goes by...” (6).

“Write carelessly” first appears in Book 4 (27). Preceding it are two telling fellow adages: “Take refuge in a long poem” and “Avert / inspiration.” The former is taken at face value: we participate in that refuge, just as Stanley takes refuge in reading *Paterson* as well as writing *Vancouver*. In the latter the break after “avert” is curious. “Avert” in common usage is often followed by “crisis” or used as a command as in “avert your eyes” to avoid them being damaged (by a powerful light, etc.) or to avoid seeing something offensive or disgraceful. (With a misty subject like “inspiration” how much more powerful a word to use than “avoid”!) It is difficult to overcome the temptation to read these imperatives as a logical progression even though they appear free from immediately surrounding contexts (if that can be said in such a poem where every image and statement may be argued to be in context, however indirect, with another). “Write carelessly” appears again, slightly elaborated, several lines forward as a self-corrective to the surrounding lines: “all this is too thoughtful—write carelessly, head down, feeling furrow of brow, weight of glasses...” (27).

This determined carelessness serves an important function in *Vancouver*. Its essence is the desire not to overdo things. Write and leave the care of meaning to others. Do your work and disregard the work not yours to do (“drained of the need / of the will / for everything to be marshaled” (42). Careless as a generative tool; careless as a method of letting go of false senses of clarity and meaning; careless as a mode of concentration; careless as a resource for generating or discovering suitable material as well as refining the scope of the poem, providing direction when it strays toward areas that seem obvious or irrelevant. Careless is trusting instincts (another contradiction). Writing carelessness into a poem that is anything but carelessly written takes a certain kind of care, devotion and trust. Careless as chance: “this is not the world” (following an in-the-moment description, and linked by an em-dash to “I really don’t know what I’m doing—”) “It’s just my take. My lucky take” (26). Luck is a relative, with a more positive association, of “careless” but containing more deliberateness than chance. Careless becomes part of the process, a method: “dutiful,

perfunctory—& yet a pleasure / not to have any ‘meaning’ interfere, / long, drawn-out, even before it’s thought. / Let’s be clear / (blank) there’s nothing to say here” (29). Such productive carelessness, assisting in hitting the right notes, requires vigilance.

Vancouver isn’t careless. It isn’t careless in the sense of being badly written or making a series of poor choices. It isn’t careless in the sense that careless writing could have been edited out. On the contrary, over-careful writing is avoided in the pursuit of the careless. (“—what is this all about? Something else than / is given in perception, so shut your eyes. Shut the mind’s eyes. / Fiercely” [46]). Careless functions like a reset button, a fresh start. We can see how this is effected by tracing the appearances and contexts of careless and care. Maintaining a stance of careless throughout *Vancouver* is critical to providing the substantial power this poem radiates as a discursive meditation of the mingling of memory and dailiness.

“Sometimes” he writes, “the mind / is just aware of its / dumbness,” (29) by which he does not mean an unintelligence, but a desire to suppress the mind’s excessive control over the poem. The dumbness is both blockage—“stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck” (28)—or muteness at the moment of writing and a productive void out of which poetry comes “head up into no thought, even though all this district—no place to go—the irremediable—gulf—not between being and nothingness” (27). By exercising less willfulness in the poem, the poet makes possible for himself an element of surprise similar to that a reader experiences reading the poem for the first time.

Book 9 serves as a micro-example of how the redirection to write carelessly is a pacing device as well as one of restraint. About midway through the book, in a break from the vignettes and images of being in the present, is a lengthy paragraph (prose? as in *WCW*?) describing a fellow drinker at the bar who fell asleep and is escorted out. Then there is a section break and a fresh start: “Write carelessly & / stop focusing” and “I’m in the bar, / I’m happy but I’m lost whenever I come / to this point / of embarrassment as if to take over / knowledge that not yet / exists, is, write carelessly, write / at the brink” (65). Book 9 is an elegy: one person in the hospital, another dead. The self-directives amid description then appear, in addition to being a restorative tactic to get the poem back on track, a non-justification for the writing life itself, where everything in the mix is thrown together a bit more sharply than before:

Writing—to see what turns up, or to keep going. Adrienne Rich writing for her survival. To keep going, by this means—& it’s not to fake out a justification—

excuse—in itself—or is it? (now the SeaBus passes the stern of *Cielo di Monfalcone*, Monrovia & turns (?) sharply right (stbd.), so the whole harbour seems to wheel around, bringing the Second Narrows into view, & now the drydocks on the North Shore, & the SeaBus headed for its slip)—or occupational therapy? That the work be interesting, & fill (part of) the time.

To survive—those who are dying? To die.
To write without any justification, carelessly,
ah yes. Not to create any structure. (66)

The statement “Write carelessly, but slowly” appears in Book 10 of *Vancouver*, the culmination of other iterations of this thought. That this formulation is also a further refinement of previous occurrences suggests that it is more an organic and evolving principle than a mantra. “Writing just to get to tomorrow” (73). This insistence of “careless,” now firmly part of the poem and established as a valuable proposition for a new insight into what it means to craft a poem, fades as something not needing to be repeated further.

This essay has focused on a single aspect of *Vancouver* and has largely omitted the material around which the idea of “careless” writing revolves. In closing I wish to emphasize a moment in which the opposite of the word “careless” stands out, not only for the beautiful writing but as an instance of how the effort of keeping it careless is manifest in an articulation of “care”:

If I have only one happy moment & a kind of
sketch of the external-shape of being radiating
outward from this one of all the others, now absent,
but they are the context, they are where the care is,
for them & for me—that I am—most of it let go—
the tree and the rain and the pavement noted, but
most of it not, then what is missing?” (22)