Taking Measures

SELECTED SERIAL POEMS

George Bowering

EDITED BY STEPHEN COLLIS

Talonbooks

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Of the Dissolved

On George Bowering's Serials and Procedures

by Stephen Collis

1

There are poets who experience long and often difficult silences between bouts of feverish composition. There are also poets, versions of this first type, who, while always actively in pursuit of their work, find it a painstaking and time-consuming process of listening, gathering material, pondering, and patiently attending the moment when the words will come out just the way the poet wants. Sometimes these same poets are simply ruthless editors of their own work, who revise and rewrite the same few poems – or same few lines or even words – again and again and again, with microscopic attention, so that what finally finds its way into print (slight as it might be) is as compressed as diamonds. Then there are the polar opposites of these, poets who simply must write, compulsively, on a daily basis – improvisational language machines around whom the pages continually accumulate at breakneck speed, who simply cannot stop producing, for fear they will stop, once and for all. George Bowering falls into this latter category – is, perhaps, its paragon. A "Collected Bowering" would be a massive book – a multi-volume set of doorstops overflowing with six decades of continual, almost frantic practice. But if the book is to be contained within a single set of covers, the editor must make choices. There have been collections of Bowering's "best lyric poems," and selected volumes sampling his work across a range of forms and styles.[1] But to my mind his characteristic work has been in long serial and procedural poems: poems premised on the sort of ongoingness that best suits this poet's propulsive need to continue writing. *Taking*

Measures gathers material from the full range of Bowering's work in these longer forms, over an almost fifty-year period.

It is because George Bowering's long poems are so consistently located in proximity to the poet's lived reality – a poetry of actual (and often carefully documented) times and places of daily practice – that it is necessary to begin by separating the biographical poet from what Bowering came to call the "biotext."[2] "All writers keep a double in store," Margaret Atwood writes, "so they can save the reality for the art, and George's double was just more obvious than most" (Atwood 2014, 62). So obvious, he sometimes gets in the way of our actually reading what he has written. I like Atwood's inversion: the poet as false front for the "reality" of the art. The double Bowering kept in store for his "public life" is the affable prankster known to so many Canadian readers and writers. This is the Bowering who Rebecca Wigod describes, in *He Speaks Volumes: A Biography of George Bowering*, as a "capering personality, endearing to some, annoying to others" – the Bowering who was "the class clown as a boy in the forties and would still do anything for a laugh" (4). It is this George Bowering whose booming voice rings out at so many baseball parks and poetry readings – and it is also this George Bowering who has cut such a colourful figure in Canadian letters, from being a founding editor of the influential "poetry newsletter" *TISH* in the early 1960s, while still a student at UBC, to becoming Canada's first Parliamentary Poet Laureate. This George Bowering has published over one hundred books, a number of them winners of prestigious awards, his legendary prolificacy an apparent effort to eclipse "George Woodcock's record" (mclennan 2014, 32) – an extension, perhaps, of his obsessive interest in baseball statistics.

It is this "real," if highly performative, George Bowering that we can leave aside, as we take the measure of the "reality" he saved for his art, where a more interesting "supposed person" (as Emily Dickinson called the speakers of her poems) holds forth in the daily life of his poetry. This is where Bowering's concept of the "biotext" is so important, so much the matter of his decades-long practice in extended, book-length forms. "Autobiography replaces the writer," Bowering writes in *Errata*. "Biotext is an extension of him [*sic*]" (34). Biotext suggests a near overlap of life and writing – an almost material imbrication of the two. Joanne Saul, in *Writing the Roaming Subject: The Biotext in Canadian Literature*, describes Bowering's biotext "as a way of privileging literary form as the place where the writer of a specific poem or fiction finds him- or herself" (4). So the subject is "performative and in process within the text." "Rather than admitting a gap between self and the text," Saul continues, "the term 'biotext'

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foregrounds the writer's efforts to articulate his or her self through the writing process."

Bowering's serial and procedural poems are extended articulations of this writing self-in-process. But they are so by rendering the self simply one object among many others in the poem. As Bowering writes, having lit upon Richard Ellman's description of modernism as "the imaginative absorption of stray material," "Charles Olson saw the poet himself as stray material, as an object among objects, not the solution, but one of the dissolved" (*Errata*, 13). This is part of what makes Bowering's long poems so interesting: they are a "solution" in which the lyric (with its presiding subjectivity) is "dissolved" – a process which nevertheless leaves the "flavour" of the lyric (subject) everywhere present.

2

That poem-as-solvent has most often been called, since the middle of the previous century, a serial poem. Arriving as though in answer to William Carlos Williams's call for "a new form *before* a *new* poetry of any sort can be written" (Williams 1947–1948, 11), the serial poem was so named by Jack Spicer as "a sort of joke" description of the poetry – at once discontinuous and continuous, evincing a complex relationship between part and whole in an extended series – he and fellow San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser had begun to write in the 1950s (Spicer 1998, 52). In his 1965 Vancouver lectures, Spicer explains that the serial poem "has the book as its unit," that it "has to be chronological," and that it must essentially be improvised: "You have to go into a serial poem not knowing what the hell you're doing ... You have to be tricked into it. It has to be some path that you've never seen on a map before" (52–53). The structure is modular, with typically page-length unit following page-length unit until a book-length series is complete. It is also, in its improvised qualities, related to what Spicer called "dictation," a method of composition intended "to keep as much of yourself as possible out of the poem" (8). Bowering's version of this is the "dissolved" self, ideally present as nothing more integral to the poem than any other "stray material." Robin Blaser, glossing Spicer's comments on dictation and seriality, refers to a "practice of the outside": "A *reopened language* lets the unknown, the Other, the outside in again as a voice in the language" (Blaser 1996, 276).

In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Bowering notes that, by the 1970s at least, he was "leaning toward" the serial poem, towards a

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poetry "more likely to be incremental than expository in its ongoingness" (60–61). Later he notes again, speaking of the serial poem, "if I wanted my work to lean toward someone's it would be Spicer's" (122). *Autobiology* (1972) is clearly an exercise in serial form – perhaps Bowering's purest. But the two poems that precede *Autobiology* in the present volume also relate to Spicer and the serial poem. *Baseball* (1967) is, in Bowering's estimation, "not a serial poem, not a Spicer poem. There is too much plan for that" (*How I Wrote* 21–22). That may be true, but Spicer's presence is everywhere in that poem (it is dedicated to him, for one thing), and it self-consciously takes the book as its unit of composition (as the majority of Bowering's long poems would)3. Bowering had attended Spicer's 1965 Vancouver lectures; the "lean" in that direction had begun before any of the work collected here in *Taking Measures* had been written.

In commenting on *Genève* (1971) in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Bowering mentions Spicer's own experiments with the tarot deck as an inspiration: "We were reminded by Spicer that the cards were there to help us bring the invisible into the visible world, not by reason alone but with the help of chance and nonsense, two things I was to look for in my tarot book" (35). There is a clue, here, to exactly what Bowering does with the serial poem. Ted Byrne, writing on *Genève* in *The Capilano Review*, notes that the serial poem is "not constructed according to a plan. It is made of a series of forgettings that persist and return" (Byrne 2014, 73). He goes on to explain that "Using the tarot procedurally to structure the poem may seem to contradict this description, but it actually introduces a complimentary element of chance." This "contradiction," this almost-but-not-quite a serial poem, becomes Bowering's hallmark, as his long poems are pitched right down the middle between the serial poem proper (with its unplanned and open-ended series of "forgettings") and what is sometimes called the "procedural poem," which employs various constraints to ensure (and perhaps avoid the attribution of the poem to the "subconscious") the "complimentary element of chance."[4]

Both serial and procedural forms of long poems work around the lyrical "I"/poetic ego by turning the poem's genesis over to various "outsides," whether they be the spontaneous dictations of suggestion (Spicer writes of "Martians" and radio waves) or the pressure of arbitrary constraint. Working with the tension between plan and spontaneity, between the serial poem proper and the procedure, Bowering takes up simple and often loose constraints and then lets happen whatever happens within the space of that constraint. *Genève* is thus generated by having each page of the series respond to a randomly chosen card from the tarot deck, page after page, until the last

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card is drawn. It thereby carries what Byrne calls "a narrative charge," but eludes "narrative capture" (Byrne 2014, 74) – "the reader finds no comfort in the series, no origin, and no closure" (79). The use of the tarot deck is a "procedure," but Bowering bends the procedure away from closure. This is typical of many of the series gathered in *Taking Measures*.

Allophanes (1976), for instance, with twenty-six numbered sections, was written while Bowering sat in on a Robin Blaser course on Yeats and Joyce at Simon Fraser University in 1974 – each installment of the poem written during one of the twenty-six lectures. Blaser's materials and words formed the constraint, while the poet sat, "pen in hand," he writes in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, "looking perhaps like any student making notes in his professor's lectures" (*How I Wrote* 57). The sequence begins with a dictated line, the voice of Jack Spicer speaking directly into Bowering's "head" to say "The snowball appears in Hell / every morning at seven." Bowering sites Valéry's pronouncement that "the gods make you a gift of one line and it is your task as a poet to somehow not disappoint them with the next" (57). The "procedure," then, is the structure of the twenty-six lectures, with some of Blaser's words finding their way into what the poet writes. But the exercise is also one of dictation and automatic writing, as other elements enter into the page Bowering shapes during the lecture: random thoughts, bits and pieces from his own reading, observations, flights of fancy, misheard quotations, the given poem's own evolving momentum, and the poet's meta-commentary on the process:

> There is no perspective
>   when the eye is transparent
> When the author dies
>   I disappear
>
> Companionship is true growing up,
>   I reach for the companionship of art.

Blaser named other poets both "companions" and "horizons."[5] There are probably several companion-horizons present in Bowering's lines – Blaser of course, but possibly Emerson (that "transparent" eye), possibly Roland Barthes too (that dead author lying there). The serial poem, for Bowering – as it was in many ways for Blaser, Duncan, and Spicer – was to be an open-ended conversation with "the many co-workers in the great task of poetry" (*How I Wrote*, 42).

There are many other ways Bowering uses simple constraints to prime the pump of his serial poems – a "world of strange initiatives

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in poetry," as Ken Norris comments, "interesting strategies for writing book-length poems or serial poems" (Norris 2014, 65). Often the constraints continue to be about "companionship." *Irritable Reaching* (1986) – with its echo of Keats's famous negative capability letter – is a twenty-six-part alphabet poem, with each poem an acrostic of another writer or artist's name. The alphabet, Bowering notes, is his "favourite constraint," "because it was arranged in an order without any logic" (*How I Wrote*, 90). *Delayed Mercy* (1987) works with two main constraints: one is environmental, the poems being written at two in the morning, "when my poor brain would be at its most vulnerable" (*How I Wrote*, 96); the other comes back to the poetry of conversation, as each poem was written after reading an entire book of poetry, in one sitting, by another poet, who becomes the poem's dedicatee. Once again, the constraint is loose enough that Bowering can turn the poem in almost any direction, and the series can go on as long as needed with its – potentially at least – "unending design."

3

Spicer was not the only shaping influence on Bowering's early work on the serial poem; Gertrude Stein was also key. If the serial poem had to be written with the poet "not knowing what the hell" they were doing, Steinian automatic writing provided another appealing model. Reading Stein in Montréal in 1970, and taking his lead from Robert Duncan's "Stein Imitations"[6] and Duncan's embracing of the notion of being a "derivative poet," Bowering began his own imitations or "variations" on Stein's prose. *Autobiology* is an improvised and semi-automatic series of forty-eight prose "Chapters," which lean heavily on repetition as the poet reflects on memories grounded in his own bodily experience. For example, Chapter 45, "The Operation," involves the poet's encounters with the surgeon's scalpel:

> You bastard you bastard I said to my own body, part of my body I want you to hear about. It is my body & it rimes, this is the basis for composition & autobiology it is going to be there if you can hold still long enough for it. Hold still he said this is going to hurt & the water gusht out & a wave will cover the toes of your shoes if you stand still.

Stein's "Composition as Explanation" is the obvious point of reference here for Bowering's "composition & autobiology." Stein writes: "Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way

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life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition" (517). The "way life is conducted" is what Bowering is most commonly attempting to embody in his serial poems, and in *Autobiology* that life is the accumulated experiences of the body, a self that is composed of experiential constituent parts and the text of this life – its "composition" – is similarly an accumulation of experiences grounded in lived time and place. Take, as another example, Chapter 1, "The Raspberries":

> I loved the way they were made of many pieces in my mouth, & they came from the outside of the bush & the inside. They came from the outside in the sunshine & from the inside in the darkness, & that is where they went again. But inside in the darkness is where we are told the subconscious is & that is why I could not eat raspberries.

The "subconscious" is materialized in the poem in the form of "a bug" that the young Bowering may have accidentally eaten along with a raspberry, thus bringing something "outside" "inside" the body, triggering a phobia: "I could not eat raspberries for years after that day." What is crucial for Bowering is not the nature of the subconscious (about which he is consistently dubious[7]), but the composition of the self via a series of discrete embodied experiences: the memory of the feeling of raspberries in his mouth, the possibility of having eaten a bug, the fact that things exterior to the body become part of the body, the accumulated series of such interactions composing a life. It is the series that is the point, "beginning again and again" in each lived moment, as Stein writes, "when there is a series" (Stein 1990, 516). The series embodies the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of experiences – a series not encompassed by a linear "past present and future," as Stein again writes, but by a "prolonged" or "continuous present" (517–518). Bowering takes up this temporal problem, which he derives from Stein, in Chapter 35, "The Next Place":

> The next place is really a series of places so that the next place is really time, that is, a series, not as on the railroad, though that is certainly, there … & though we thought we thought it was always different we always acted as if it was the same, perhaps, because we were, where we were, was always the same, though we spoke always of the difference, from time to time, of the place, & so, there you are. The next place, then, is always, a series of times, & we were always careful about time.

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Time, Bowering concludes, "is converted into space." Time is not comparable to "the railroad," with a direction and constant movement, but is rather a spatially arranged series of "nows." Stein – who otherwise might appear to be a "presentist" – is actually in agreement: "The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living" (Stein 1990, 516). The understanding of time both writers stake their poetics on – and I think it is worth being precise here – is, according to the philosophy of time, a "static" or "tenseless" theory of temporality, which "treats time a lot like space" (Bardon 2013, 87). Adrian Bardon, in *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time*, describes "an array of timeless moments that are not only static but lack a direction," (122) an arbitrary series exemplified by the alphabet, one of Bowering's preferred structural devices for a poetic series. Essentially, this is time according to Einsteinian General Relativity.

Joseph Conti, in discussing the serial poem as the pre-eminent form of "postmodern" poetry, also makes the link to physics clear:

> the series articulates both the indeterminacy and the discontinuity that the scientist discovers in the subatomic world. The concept of serial form could not be convincing without the 'granular' physics of subatomic particles and molecular combination and recombination. (Conti 1991, 19)

Bowering, I would argue, in his experiments with seriality and simple procedures for generating long-form poetry, is very much interested in avoiding narratives which might depend upon long standing "meta-narratives," while at the same time coming to grips with mortality and the anxiety produced by the – apparently – rapid *passing* of time.[8]

Nowhere is this more evident than in *Do Sink* (1992), "a sonnet's worth of sonnets," as Bowering describes the "crown" of fourteen free-flowing poems (*How I Wrote*, 130), each one an extension of one of the lines from Keats's "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be." Written while Bowering drove around rural Alberta in search of his maternal grandmother's grave, Keats's poem provides more than a "procedure" for Bowering to follow – it is a method for resisting the irresistible approach of death. Bowering *inhabits* Keats's poem, expanding it, slowing it down for frame-by-frame analysis. *Do Sink* is at once a gloss on Keats's poem and theme, an homage, and an act of remaking the poem in the image of Bowering's own poetics. It is also, arguably, one of Bowering's most beautiful poems.

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When I have fears that I
may cease to be
open to pain that shines
wet on the side of a gold
fish in my own, I thought,
pond

        I ought to forget
comfort, forget family
history, drive a black sedan
over thin prairie roads
looking for a town even
my mother does not believe
was ever there

                knowing
pain is not colour, not value
but condition, the cost
of starting a damned life in
the first place, where no
thinking man ever was.

Conti, again, provides an excellent description of the serial poem's method here: "The predominant postmodern impulse has been not to destroy, or rupture, but to mutate and fuse as a process of 'making it new'" (Conti 1991, 10). In Bowering's words, his writing "takes its first foothold in previous writing, that I revise, imitate, contradict, embrace, renew" (Nichols 2014, 154). It is the process, again, of "derivation" (Duncan) and "dictation" (Spicer) that Bowering holds to throughout his long career; the work of prior poets is mined to produce the new work. It is a practice that blurs the lines between reading and writing, critical and "creative" procedures, allowing Bowering to be at once a loving "fan" of certain favourite authors (Stein or Keats), and a poet seeking his own place "in the tradition" (Nichols 2014, 154).

Arguably Bowering's most famous (and even outrageous) "derivation," as well as perhaps his most accomplished poem, is *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984). In this case it is not an engagement with a beloved precursor – Bowering in fact admits that he "didn't like Rilke all that much," the poet was simply very much "in the air" in Vancouver at the time (*How I Wrote*, 85). Nevertheless, after a false start with a homophonic translation from the German (which he does not read), Bowering began a loose translation of Rilke's ten-part long poem *Duino Elegies*, working from a range of well-established English translations.

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Bowering is not after precision: he takes liberties, foremost among them the "translation" of Rilke's poem's context from early twentieth century Europe to Bowering's own 1980s Kerrisdale neighbourhood in Vancouver (as well as the transformation of Rilke's "angels" into his own "spooks" or "ghastly dead"). It is an audacious and unattributed theft (the poem's source in Rilke is unattributed) and – the great poetic sin – toys with being mistaken for a mere paraphrase of an original "masterpiece."

Duino Elegies is not a serial poem, but Bowering lays his elegies out as a series of nearly discrete page-poems, so there is yet another level of translation – that of poetics. Bowering stays close to Rilke's original, line by line, but constantly makes the poem his own (whatever that might actually mean in this context); as he does with Keats in *Do Sink*, he inhabits the original poem's themes and ideas, exploring them anew, providing a striking creative gloss and expansion. But where with Keats the derivation was one driven by a love of his precursor, here Bowering steps around Rilke himself, deriving directly from the language itself. Rilke, as a historical figure, does not matter at all to Bowering; he is simply a source of material, of an arrangement of language that Bowering can appropriate and rearrange. This "appropriation" could also be called a "commoning," as Robert Duncan writes in *The H.D. Book*: "The goods of the intellect are communal" and flow "from the language itself" (Duncan 2011, 546). "The English language," Bowering writes, in clear agreement with Duncan, "is a giant derivation machine" (*How I Wrote*, 43).[9] This is Bowering's approach across all his serial and procedural poems: listening carefully to the language itself – taking the material of poetry up *as material*, and *working it* – as the shaping *outside* within which daily life unfolds, and in which the poet's mortal singularity is *dissolved*.

4

The record of the poet's "life and times," framed as a series of discrete yet continuous temporal moments of "the way life is conducted" – the biotext that nevertheless gets "rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego," thereby revealing "secrets objects share" (Olson 1997, 247)[10] – Bowering achieves all of this largely through the simple "constraint" of a daily writing practice. There are "travel" poems which are fashioned by writing one segment of the poem each day of the poet's trip. *Blonds on Bikes* (1997), written while travelling in Europe, and *Los Pájaros de Tenacatita* (2013), written in Mexico, are both composed this way; it is a process which highlights the conjunction of

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place and time – of fleeting moments of objecthood carefully observed and recorded. There is something about being away from home and normal routine that heightens the compression of life and work, as Bowering himself notes of *Blonds on Bikes*: "It's almost as if living is writing poetry or *vice versa*" (*How I Wrote*, 134).

His Life (2000) takes the conjunction of the composition of one's times and one's poetry one step further, using the poet's own journals as source material for a long series. Bowering began keeping a diary in 1958; in 1988, after thirty years of almost daily recording, he decided to try to compose a serial poem using the diary as a constraint. "Banality is all right," Bowering writes, but while it might be "alright" for a diary, *His Life* compresses large amounts of material, with each poem summarizing a season-in-the-life, which keeps banality in check. Nevertheless, it is definitely the quotidian moments of lived experience that Bowering wants to prioritize. Take, for example, "Summer 1963. Vancouver":

> *Am I the god?*
> *or does this fire carve me*
> *for its use?*
>
> The romantic poet falls back on intensity of feeling
> rather than striving for clarity & precision.
>
> He lies in bed till the jangling is gone from his head,
> then rises and begins a poem by natural light.
>
> He doesnt believe that man is a super creature
> exalting his soul over a world made of things
> transformed by the superior imagination.
>
> •
>
> A man is more interesting
> than man.
>
> Neither is true, both sound swell,
> god and fire.
>
> He loves the bush,
> not the voice in the bush.

The "world made of things" – "the bush" rather than "the voice in the bush" – is what Bowering traces from his journals. But the

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"things" that compose the poet's world are also textual "things," so this poem begins with a quotation from H.D.'s *Collected Poems*. *His Life* is filled with passages from H.D. – a poet who has long been one of Bowering's companions in verse. It may even be that, in pondering his own "life's work" in a reflective journal-poem like *His Life*, Bowering wanted the companionship of another poet's collected lifework. H.D.'s presence is also an opportunity to resituate his own practice of writing-his-reading, a move away from the "saying" (as he writes in "Winter 1985. Vancouver") of his own earlier lyric poems to the "Later Long Poems," where "You Listen And Write." Furthermore, it is another "dissolution" of the self, whereby taking the measure of one's own life is dependent upon one's relation to another poet's body of work, a relation which calls Bowering's own sense of his poetic self to order throughout *His Life*.

I will conclude here with the poem that gives this volume its title – *At War with the US* (1974):

> There comes a time
> when we must
> take measures.

This is the entire first page of this serial poem. The "measures" being "taken" are complex and not at first obvious. Written in 1973, the poem addresses the winding down of the war in Vietnam, U.S. imperialism, and the bombing of Cambodia, as well as the poet's daily life as he sees his daughter Thea "off to her war called school." So one measurement the poem takes is that between a calm and ordinary life in quiet Vancouver and the machinations of global politics. Indeed, this is Bowering's most overtly political work, written with the political poetry of Shelley and Duncan in mind, peppered with quotations from Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (both writing during an American war). Somewhere behind all of this is the ghost of Canada's own "War Measures Act" (called upon by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1970 during the October Crisis), as well as an anarchic refusal of the state – whether in the form of its militarism or educational commandments.

> & who are we
>
> The sheer
> intensity
> & numbers of their bombs—

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they are trying to obliterate
measure, the inevitable measure

& making count of themselves

We help them count
one two three

They see their fear
walking out of the bush
four five six

The "measures" taken by states against both internal and external "enemies" are such that they can and too often do "obliterate" any other form of measure. In this instance, "measure" is like "value": the word can signify simply material "exchange value," but it can also signify those difficult-to-measure "values" that form the very fabric of a life. Bowering's poem stands for those more subtle measures and values, against those obliterating measures and values of states and markets.

The "measure" taken in *At War* is also the measure of the serial poem – still a form Bowering is learning to master at this point in the early 1970s. "All verse is measure," Williams wrote. "We may not be able to measure it, we may not know how but, finally, it is measured" (Williams 1947–1948, 12). Like a number of Bowering's serial poems, *At War* is written in a notebook chosen for the task, and in this instance, the last page of the notebook determines the last page of the poem: It is written, one poem a page, until the notebook is filled. Chance – the aleatory fact of the unpredictable number of pages in the poet's notebook – once again draws attention to Bowering's attempt to keep the open-ended nature of the series and the procedural constraint in active tension. To remain with the tension between chance and determinism, between page and series, between "the way life is conducted" and the temporally contingent practice of writing poetry – this is the measure taken by Bowering's serial and procedural poems. The serial poem is born of relativity – takes the measure of the relative, relational spaces it constitutes *as it constitutes it*. And while this may not be something the poet knows how to measure, in advance, finally, the life is lived, the poem written to its inconclusive conclusion, and the measure is taken.

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A NOTE ON USAGE

The original terminology used in these poems has been retained, even where that terminology, for very good reasons, has changed in general usage over the past few decades. Thus the gender specific "man" used to denote humankind generally is retained, as in the line "Man is not except as he does." This decision is taken not out of some sense of the sacrosanct nature of the original, but in fact to retain this poetry's sometimes problematic "stance" and the privileges and prejudices of the period it was written in. This is poetry written as lived, with as little filter applied as possible; what we thus encounter, in part, is the entanglement of both a particular subjectivity and general, historically specific social structures. More troubling still, the word "Indian" is also retained, as in the reference to Manuel Louis as "chief of the Indians around Oliver." In the late 1960s, coming from the pen of a settler poet, this would be fairly standard usage. Changing the word to the now more appropriate generic "Indigenous people" or, more specifically, the Syilx First Nation, would simply cover over the realities of settler/Indigenous relations of the period which boil over into the poetry, where a cosmic baseball diamond becomes the meeting point for settler and Indigenous players.

—S.C., Vancouver, April 2019

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NOTES

1 *Changing on the Fly: The Best Lyric Poems of George Bowering* (Vancouver: Polestar, 2004); *Particular Accidents: Selected Poems*, ed. Robin Blaser (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980); *George Bowering Selected: Poems 1961–1992*, ed. Roy Miki (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).
2 On the connection between the biotext and seriality, consider Fred Wah's comment in *Diamond Grill* that "a biotext, perhaps more than other literary genres, seems an innately cumulative performance" (Wah 1997, ix).
3 *Baseball* was originally published by Coach House Press as a slim, bright green, pennant-shaped triangle.
4 Joseph Conti, in *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*, carefully delineates serial and procedural forms: "The series is determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another," Conti writes, while "procedural form consists of predetermined and arbitrary constraints that are relied upon to generate the context and direction of the poem during composition" (3).
5 "Image-Nation 5 (Erasure," *The Holy Forest* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993), 113.
6 Published as *Writing Writing: A Composition Book for Madison, 1953: Stein Imitations* by Fred Wah and Pauline Butling's Sumbooks in 1964.
7 "I believe in the idea of verse as given by an inspirer, muse or ghost or whatever, but not subconscious, though I can see how that would do it for some people" (*How I Wrote* 86).
8 "Apparent" because, according to the physicists, the static theory of time is correct, while the flow and "directionality of time is … based on a mere convention as it arises from human psychology" (Bardon 122).
9 Another version of this is told by Aaron Peck, who found a second-hand copy of Clarice Lispector's *Stream of Life* which was once owned by Bowering, in which the poet has underlined and copied out the lines "language has *already said* everything" (Peck 2014, 193).
10 Bowering writes of looking "for other ways to generate texts without the interference of my will" (*How I Wrote* 96).

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The Way It Is with Me

by George Bowering

The first long poem I ever wrote was about headhunters in Malacca. I started it in high school and carried it for years, occasionally showing it to girls and then young women with a hope of appearing interesting. Finally, I lent it to an exotic female friend of my first real Vancouver girlfriend. That exotic young woman kept it for a long time, and eventually married a good friend of mine who happened to be a poet, I have no idea whether he ever got to read it, and I never saw it again, thank goodness. Everything turned out well for all three of us.

I like that story, and it is close to true. I think that what I lent to Dolly was really my first short story, "My Brother's Keeper." So, if I were now writing a note for my partly collected short stories, I would just have to change headhunters to brothers, and it would be true. Or close. In any case, I am happy to report that neither the long poem nor the story has shown up, as far as I know.

Before I went to university, I liked realism, in fiction and in poetry. I wanted to write like James T. Farrell and Kenneth Rexroth. I wanted to pursue facts and thus reality. It took a while, but I learned instead to pursue the poem, to try to go where it was going.

It was very romantic, going to university. You could go into a big stony library and read all the books you wanted – for free. So I decided to read the books of poems that were labelled "PS" something, U.S. poetry. Some "PR" along the way, a bit of "PQ." It was difficult but romantic to go through Hart Crane again. It was an enjoyable slog through Whitman. There wasn't much H.D., but it was better than the few tiny lyrics in the anthologies I'd seen.

Then one afternoon I pulled out a newish volume titled *The Desert Music,* and started to give it a little read. Time became tempo. It was all at once closing time in an empty library. I was standing with sore

legs on the bottom tier, and when I dropped the book from my sore hands it made a very loud echoing clatter on the concrete floor.

That was the moment I felt that I could learn poetry. William Carlos Williams was an old man when he made that beautiful long poem, and would wind up saying "I am a poet." But he also said (and you could not stand between the stacks and not move your lips while reading):

> I am that he whose brains
> are scattered
>   aimlessly

It would be years before I learned that he was semi-quoting Goethe. It was enough to hear for the first time how rime works when someone frees it.

So I grabbed all the Williams books I was allowed and took them to my rented basement with the cot and plywood desk in it, and started reading all those little doctor poems – I'd found my realist poet.

Then I tried to read *Kora in Hell*. And whatever strange classroom I had looked into, I wanted a seat in it. Many years later I sat in on a semester's lectures by the great poet Robin Blaser, and wrote a poem (*Allophanes*) all the while he was talking. But Dr. Williams – he started it for me. He wrote an early poem addressed to his old mother, a poem in fifteen sections. Here is the fifteenth:

> All this—
>   was for you, old woman.
> I wanted to write a poem
> that you would understand.
> For what good is it to me
> if you can't understand it?
>   But you got to try hard—
> But—
>   Well, you know how
> the young girls run giggling
> on Park Avenue after dark
> when they ought to be home in bed?
> Well,
> that's the way it is with me somehow.

So it's been with me, I think. I love both difficulty and seeming simplicity in verse. What I am not fond of are laxity and self-expression. So you see why I keep mentioning William Carlos Williams and H.D. and Jack Spicer.

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Whoever was handing out good luck, I'd like to say thanks for seeing that the wonderful little magazines and innovative poetry presses arrived just in time. I owe my soul to the poets and other angels who found space for us at Talonbooks, Coach House Press (and then Coach House Books), El Corno Emplumado, Véhicule Press, Black Moss Press, and others. They say you make your luck. I don't know. I just wanted to write a poem.

—G.B, Vancouver, April 2019

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