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The Politics of Modern Literary Innovation: A Rhetorical Perspective

Modern literary innovation is often impelled by an agonistic or competitive urge to go one better than authorial precedents, to subvert or reject the values of the past by changing the written rhetoric or denouncing the authority, discursive practices, or rhetorics of past writers. Harold Bloom's work teaches us that strong writers who are highly self-conscious of their indebtedness to precursors will compete with canonical authors and struggle to establish an original imaginative space (Bloom 5) for their writing through innovation: formal innovation is a necessary part of the rhetorical struggle to cope with the anxiety of influence, to be original, and to establish a distinct identity. This view of literary innovation as an intertextual power struggle accords with postmodern views of the centrality of power in uses of discourse and social relations. Michel Foucault stated that "the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war" (114) and Linda Hutcheon says "we owe to Roland Barthes the strong formulation if not the concept that language is always fascist and that power is involved in even the most subtle mechanisms of social exchange" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 74).

Discourses of power and the filiations of power in social relations are central to contemporary theories of experimental writing. I want to explore these here by first presenting an overview of the power politics of literary innovation, especially postmodern innovation; second, I want to describe the political alignments cultivated by the supporters of literary postmodernism as well as the arguments of the detractors. I will suggest that what we need is further rhetorical scrutiny of postmodern writing in order to defend or discount the claims of postmodern innovation. In conclusion I will

present a rhetorical reading of George Bowering's *Burning Water* as a practical step towards this kind of scrutiny.

The Politics of Literary Innovation

The social implications of innovation or experiment in the novel, and the experimenter's attitude to power and authority, must first be framed by the contexts of the sociology and philosophy of art. The very meaning of experimentalism, innovation, or the *idea* of the avant-garde in art has anti-authority implications. As Renato Poggioli observes in *The Theory of the Avant Garde*, the present experimental vanguard always becomes an institution against which future generations must argue and struggle in order to establish their own originality and novelty (80). The specific elements of any experimental art must be different from generation to generation, for it is originality and novelty that displaces competitors from the locus of attention in the art world and allows the new art movement to dominate momentarily.

The history of the experimental novel is no exception to this type of competition and generational conflict. In the nineteenth century, Zola militated against the subjective fantasies of"idealists" and "purely imaginary novels" (18), and he defined the experimental novel as a scientific method of empirical observation, an approach to human behavior that was literally an "experiment." Zola's realistic naturalism sought to reveal the biological and social causes of human action; he wanted the novel to be a tool for social and psychological analysis.

In the early twentieth century, modernists like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson—stylistically more innovative but less obviously political than the upcoming Orwells and Koestlers—evolved their own experiments for probing human reality. Their experiments with non-linear narrative and metaphoric renderings of psychological states can be seen as both a rejection of the demands of Zola's objective realism and as a radical fulfilment of such demands. More recent experimenters in the novel, labelling themselves "postmodernists," "post-realists," and "fabulators," continue the process of generational rebellion, and assert that they are neither interested in the empirical investigations of naturalism, nor in the phenomenological investigations of the psychological novelist (see Klinkowitz, Federman, Scholes, Stevick): the contemporary experimental novelist is preoccupied with the writing process, with the conundrums of

self-reflexive narrative, with the linguistic pattern of the text, and sometimes with the novel's game-like features. John Hawkes writes:

> I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. (qtd. in Bradbury 7)

It would seem that this recent emphasis on pure form and structure is entirely at odds with the scientific study of living characters and concrete environments that Zola envisioned as the novel's function in the nineteenth century.

Of course, formal self-awareness is not peculiar to contemporary experimental novels; it has been an aspect of the novel, as Malcolm Bradbury reminds us, since its emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And ever since its emergence, Bradbury says, the novel's two reputations have "both contested and consorted with each other": the "process of oscillation" between realism and fabulation that has been so marked in the twentieth century, that seems to distinguish the two sides of a current "debate" about the novel, is generated by two different impulses that have always been part of the nature of the novel. On the one hand, there is "the novel's propensity toward realism, social documentation and interrelation with historical events and movements," and on the other hand, there is "its propensity toward form, fictionality and reflexive self-examination" (Bradbury 8). In the nineteenth century it is the extreme swing to the former which is presented as an innovative, experimental, or radical gesture; in the twentieth century, it is the swing to the latter.

Since the late nineteenth century, thus, the answer to the question of what elements constitute an experimental novel has changed as the interests of different generations have changed. The present generation of postwar experimental novelists is hostile to scientific empiricism, condescending to the conventions of realism, and distrustful of political conservatism, indeed politics in general. Having inherited a Romantic contempt for Classical notions of imitation, (or a Crocean contempt for theories of language as ornate form), as Poggioli suggests, the only "constants" that modern experimental art will readily admit to being bound to are restlessness, discontent with the past, and a hostility to "conservative" authority, beliefs, values, and conventions (80).

All literature, whether one emphasizes its propensity towards realism or towards antimimetic lexical play, presents world views or ideologies, and, often, critical attitudes to particular social institutions, to the use of power, and to the nature of particular forms of authority. However, the contemporary experimental novel is often more emphatic in its promotion of counter-ideology. Contemporary novels are often experimental in order to align themselves with an attitude critical to the dominant beliefs, assumptions, and values of society. Distinctly different from realism in its formal preoccupations, it often presents radical philosophical and political concepts, is preoccupied with power and authority, and a revolutionary or counter-ideology political status is claimed for it by many of its partisan critics or the novelists themselves—even if this political status is sometimes one that denies that ideological and political views are a part of the novelist's interests.

How can one begin to assess the counter-ideology theory of contemporary experimental fiction? I shall answer this question by first considering the arguments of some important critics, both North American and European, who argue that there is a correspondence between formal experiment and adversarial politics; and second, by considering the arguments of the negative critics of experimental fiction.

In Defense of Experiment

Among the theorists who promote experimental writing, there are two responses to the connection between literature and politics: one response is to argue that the experimental techniques—discontinuous forms, self-reflexivity, linguistic play, and antimimetic elements—are truly revolutionary because they resist the oppressive homogeneity that is enforced by the dominant institutions in modern society. A second response is that experimental technique is entirely divorced from political or ideological interest, and that writers do not intend to sell the reader any political bill of goods, only the aesthetic experience of reading a novel: the writer is rhetorically innocent. Both types of theorist emphasize the aesthetic experience of the novel's form and downplay the suasive power that the writer has over the reader. They argue that the reader is always liberated by the open-ended forms employed by the author.

Herbert Marcuse represents the first type of theorist, the advocate of experiment as cultural criticism. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse says

that "As ideology, [art]opposes the given society. The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: "things must change" (13). From this general premise regarding the counter-ideology role of art in society, Marcuse moves to explanations of how particular aesthetic tactics are politically significant: "Discontinuous forms and fragmentation are aesthetic *resistances* to the role and power of 'the whole'; of the administered unification of man which saps his subjectivity—collage and multimedia effects are *not* a reflection of reality but a resistance to homogeneity" (50).

John Barth, the American metafiction writer, echoes Marcuse when he writes in his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," that the "very idea of the controlling artist, has been condemned as politically reactionary, even fascist" (qtd. in Bradbury 71). Linda Hutcheon complements this when she says in the conclusion to *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* that "To read is to act; to act is both to interpret and to create anew—to be revolutionary, perhaps in political as well as literary terms. There is much freedom-inducing potential in metafiction generally" (161).

The second type of theorist, the one who divorces experimental technique from political interest, is represented by the postmodern Canadian novelist George Bowering. For George Bowering, being a post-realist experimental writer means greater formal self-consciousness (i.e. true experimental professionalism), eschewal of realist illusionism, avoidance of naturalist assumptions of determinism, and an appreciation of the pleasure of textual play. Bowering is anti-ideological and does not regard experimental writing as a form of political intervention. He insists on the precise use of "experimental" to designate those writers who consciously manipulate conventions and deliberately play with or undermine the rules of genre: in Bowering's view, b.p. nichol is "A truly experimental writer" (*Fiction* 15); however, Daphne Marlatt "is not an experimental writer . . . but a phenomenological one, perhaps our most easily observable example of Olson's proprioceptive writer" (14). For Bowering, traditional realist fiction attempts to operate in a wholly referential fashion, and depends on "closing one's eyes to the facts" (*Mask* 121) of form (the frame of the theatrical stage), and the lexical surface of the text. Realist fiction attempts to "produce a window on the world" and hence such fiction values "invisibility" and "transparency," like the Jamesian novel that never draws attention to itself as an artifact; but postmodern novels are like "stained-glass windows or cut-glass windows that divert light waves and

restructure the world outside" (25). Bowering's emphasis on the non-representational, antimimetic function of postmodern writing is exemplified in his reference to the American novelist Ronald Sukenick's comparison of contemporary fiction to abstract painting: "You cannot look through it to reality—it is the reality in question and if you don't see it you don't see anything at all" (121).

But Bowering's example begs an important question: why the content, ideas, and representations of language should be any less interesting than the formal qualities of texts is never fully justified. While he is eager to praise the antireferential forms, and tactile surface pleasures and intrigues of postmodern fiction, he, ironically, must use metaphors like the "stained-glass window" and referential language to express his experience of the form of the new fiction; and while Bowering comes close to asking us to pay attention to the style of the new writing, never does he provide an analysis of how the language—style in general, or in particular, syntax, modality, lexis—of the new fiction is unique.

Bowering reduces the importance of realism and its content, because he does not see such content as intellectual and argumentative—it is simply a form of reporting, for in his view, "a major function of the novel was always to bring the news, to tell the story of the emerging middle class" (124). According to Bowering, the depiction of our daily social reality was once best undertaken by the novel, "the clearest way to show the quotidian details of life in Bombay or Quebec"; now, however, "the sociology books and television can give us all the news we need" (124).

For all of Bowering's self-consciousness of how form affects our perceptual experience and cognition of the perceived object, he has, surprisingly, a "realist's" faith in the transparency of the "windows" of "sociology books" and "television." For if sociology books and television do shape our apprehension of the world—give us the news, so to speak—then we should understand how these forms influence or even manipulate our understanding of content. But there is no theory of the relationship between form and content in Bowering, just as there is no acknowledgement that all books and films do not simply imitate reality, but influence our understanding of reality, and argue from a particular perspective. Above all, Bowering ignores the authorial voice that guides the addressee—whether in written discourse or the filmic mode—and hence would have us believe that experimental discourses are rhetorically innocent.

Bowering's defense of postrealist fiction is eventually turned into what Gerald Graff calls a postmodernist's visionary strategy of transcendence (*Literature* 13-18): since fiction is deceitful if it tries to convey the real world, then we will subsume the real world under the category of fiction and eliminate the problem of truthful representation. Thus, while the old realists "assumed that there was a real world one could make sense of and care enough about to want to correct," the present writers are less naive: "A lot of novelists will agree that the real world is a fiction, one of a number of them, from any logical or phenomenological viewpoint a fiction" (*Mask* 126). One might assume that this casting of reality into fiction well serves Bowering's anti-realism. But the notion that the world is a fictional construct actually supports our understanding of the world: to say that the world is a fiction implies that you do know, and can make sense of, external reality—not that the world is resistant to understanding. Ironically, Bowering must affirm the principle of knowing reality, even while professing anti-mimeticism. But if the external world is constructed by man-made fictions, or socially constructed knowledge, then we should attempt to understand what kinds of consciousness produce these fictions, how these fictions influence readers, and what kinds of world views and social values are being promoted. Bowering's anti-realism has the unfortunate effect of presenting experimental fictions as ideologically innocent, as using ideas that do not originate in human political interests, and forms that are not rhetorically designed to promote the assimilation of particular beliefs and values. His position is that of the liberal who believes that his is the only ideology that is non-ideological.

Many of the theorists who defend experimental fiction are ambivalent about the relationship between writing and society, between novels and politics. As Graff has pointed out in *Literature Against Itself*, they both attempt to withdraw from the world of politics and to swallow it (17). Robert Kroetsch, recently regarded as a primary spokesman for postmodern Canadian fiction, has said in an interview that he is "quite aware of being without ideology" (qtd. in Neuman 33); yet on the same occasion, he said that he has a "very strong identification with that notion of a non-violent anarchy [represented in Bakhtin's revolutionary ideology of carnival] because all systems have been oppressive to us on the prairies" (Neuman 35). Kroetsch, like Bowering, would have us believe that he is without

ideology; but like Marcuse, he seeks to be identified as part of a counter-ideology.

Do the experimental narrative strategies allow fiction to play an adversarial role, a revolutionary role in society? Or do they, as Bowering believes, allow the novelist to transcend the quotidian world of sociology books and television and become a discourse that is beyond mere ideological interests? These are questions that are posed by certain negative critics of literary experimentalism, and it is their arguments that I shall turn to next.

Critics of Experimentalism

The political claims of experimental fiction—meaning the equating of such elements as discontinuous form, authorial self-reflexivity, and linguistic play with liberal or revolutionary politics, or ideas which are opposed to reactionary or conservative values—have been scrutinized and criticized by Georg Lukács, Irving Howe, Renato Poggioli, and, most recently, Gerald Graff and Charles Newman. All of these critics test the political and epistemological claims made by experimental or avant-garde art.

Poggioli dismisses the political alignment of the avant-garde with revolutionary politics: "the identification of artistic revolution with the social revolution is now no more than purely rhetorical, an empty commonplace" (96). Poggioli would seem to confirm Robert Kroetsch's belief that experimental writing like Kroetsch's own is apolitical because "the only omnipresent or recurring political ideology within the avant-garde is the least political or the most antipolitical of all: libertarianism and anarchism" (96).

Lukács, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, opposes the celebration of solipsism and subjectivity in literature because such subjectivism merely multiplies the epistemological distortions that modern society encourages in order to entrench its values; if literature is to be an authentic criticism of such a society, then "literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to 'place' distortion correctly; that is to say, to see it *as* distortion" (33). Lukács's arguments for realism and truthful representation are posed in an even stronger way by Gerald Graff.

In his analyses of the politics of experimental art, Graff has tested the consistency of avant-garde ideology. First, he exposes the oversimplification and the lack of sociological proof in avant-garde theories of authority

and social repression, and he argues convincingly that postmodern counter-ideology, which celebrates its own alienation and marginality, is not really *counter* to the dominant ideology of the contemporary Western world, the ideology of advanced capitalism: the postmodern counter-ideology, ironically, is a symptom of advanced capitalism. Second, Graff carefully examines the arguments that relate the disrupted, antimimetic forms of literature to revolutionary politics and he finds significant contradictions in these arguments.

In his essay, "The Pseudo-Politics of Interpretation," Graff shows how radical interpretation theorists set up a quarrel with pragmatic critical theory: the radical relates objectivity to the ideology of modern authority, an authority which operates through structures of "centrism, hierarchy, and constraint" ("Pseudo-Politics" 154). However, this depiction of how modern authority operates in the industrialized western world, and the correspondence between this authority and specific literary forms, is never supported by valid argument and proof:

> When one of the above-quoted critics [Stanley Fish, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartmann, et al] draws a connection between objectivist hermeneutics and "technocratic violence," for example, it's noteworthy that he leaves it to the reader to guess what theory of technocracy he may have in mind. . . . Most of the statements quoted advance sociological theses of considerable weight and comprehensiveness as if there were no need to defend or elaborate on them; yet a little scrutiny suggests that these theses are little more than commonplaces about technology or authority. (153)

The commonplaces about technology and authority lead the radical theorist to purvey an outdated myth of the repressive nature of society because, Graff argues, "patriarchy, authoritarianism, and elitism are not the main enemies." The counter-ideologists' energies have been "diverted from legitimate targets—injustice, poverty, triviality, vulgarity, and social loneliness—to a spurious quest after psychic liberation" (*Literature* 101). Authority in an advanced capitalist society operates in far more complex ways than the avant-garde's conception of it. An art which promotes revolution, non-linear flux, and is anti-ideological does not subvert the dominant ideology of the status quo but abets it. As Graff says,

> . . . the real avant garde is advanced capitalism, with its built-in need to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, all continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption. (*Literature* 4)

We should note that Graff is not merely refuting the avant-garde's claim that it is resisting the authoritarian nature of social institutions. Graff is arguing that postmodernism—read experimentalism and avant-gardism—is in harmony with the consumer sensibility, and hence, it thrives. In our highly developed consumer society, discontinuities, changes in fashion, and ephemeral novelty have caused "a derangement of the senses that makes the disruptions and defamiliarizations of vanguard culture look puny by comparison" (92). As Graff says, "The juxtaposition of terror and triviality, consequence and irrelevance, in an average newspaper front-page or news broadcast does more to assault hierarchically ordered thinking than the most uncompromising example of anti-object art" (97).

In his chapter on "The Politics of Anti-Realism," Graff criticizes the avant-garde and Neo-Marxist critics who use analogical reasoning to argue that "closed forms" are reactionary and "open" forms are progressive. Graff tests this claim by asking how such open forms can expose contradictions when they are "themselves expressions of a viewpoint distorted by alienation":

> Where does literature get the perspective that permits it to present distortion *as* distortion? How does it make itself a criticism of ideological contradictions rather than a symptom of them? (70)

In his analysis of the politics of the experimental, not only does Graff show that the epistemological scepticism of the anti-realist is contradictory—that is, to be able to recognize the unintelligibility of our "unreal" world *is* to propose a way of understanding the way things really are—but Graff also identifies the equivocation in modern intellectuals who attempt to eliminate the referential claims of art. Graff uses two aesthetic aphorisms from Oscar Wilde to exemplify the "formalist" and "visionary" strategies of antireferential critics: on the one hand, Wilde is a "formalist" who argues for the radical autonomy of the artifact, for "art never expresses anything but itself"; on the other hand, Wilde's aesthetic envelops the reality of the everyday world, and "life imitates art far more than art imitates life" (qtd. in *Literature* 18)—this is what Graff labels the "visionary" strategy. The

"formalist" and "visionary" strategies reflect "the social ambivalence of the modern literary intellectual, who is tempted equally to withdraw from society and politics, and to try to take them over" (44). Both strategies are clearly subscribed to by George Bowering who says that art "is the reality in question" and that the "real world is a fiction" (*Mask* 121, 126).

What Graff attempts to revivify is that which the antireferential, anti-realist critics have attempted to destroy: the ability to analyze literature's claim to truth. Graff finds it particularly dangerous that teachers of literature in the humanities have been giving up their claims to be able to teach people anything about the kinds of truth-claims or propositions about reality that literature presents, thus self-destructively conceding ground to the detractors of the humanities and collaborating, unwittingly, in the trivialization of the discipline. The anti-realist movement in experimental fiction attempts to short-circuit propositional analysis and ideological scrutiny by claiming that reality cannot be comprehended through literary forms (the "formalist strategy"), or that, as in Bowering's case, such fiction is ideologically innocent.

Motives for Rhetorical Readings

I have referred to the work of Graff in some detail because he provides an extensive theoretical scrutiny of the libertarian political claims of experimental writing. Graff defines some general theoretical problems in the arguments of critics who promote experimentalism. How does Graff's work apply to the rhetorical analysis of contemporary fiction?

One motive for the rhetorical analysis of contemporary fiction is ideological description: to describe how authors influence and control their readers through rhetorical strategies and guide them towards an acceptance of particular depictions of social authority. Borrowing from Graff, one can ask if experimental writers control the reader through spectacular effects, disruptive forms, and narrative tactics which are part of an irrational mode of persuasion, and how the kinds of social authority which they critique are specifically presented.

Graff's mode of critical inquiry leads to important issues in the sociology of knowledge, for example, to an understanding of how the ideology of postmodernism, the experimental, or the avant-garde is passed on to students by avant-garde educators, and how this shapes the style of

humanistic education. However, the task of the rhetorician would be to analyze both the ideas of authority and the rhetorical tactics used in innovative contemporary novels; that is, to do what Graff does not—to describe how the experimental style affects the reader; and to describe the specific social and political content or arguments presented in the novels. Graff concentrates his analysis on epistemology and the theory of discontinuous forms; but he is not able, given the metacritical nature of his study, to examine the kinds of rhetoric and the kinds of depictions of authority in experimental texts. If we are to describe accurately how experimental novels either promote critical understanding of society or disarm our intelligence, then we need to analyze the relationship between the text and the reader, and the rhetorical effects of the experimental novel; if we are to assess the political ideas in these works, then we must describe the propositions that they present—implicitly or explicitly—concerning the nature of authority. Graff tells us that "To determine the politics of any theory, we must look at the way it functions in particular social circumstances" ("Pseudo Politics" 133).

My purpose here has been to provide reasons for the application of rhetorical theory to literature; my mode has been hortatory rather than expository. However, I would like to point to the contribution that the sociolinguist Roger Fowler has made to rhetorical theory and suggest some practical measures for the rhetorical criticism of experimental fiction.

Fowler's critical philosophy is indebted to the sociolinguistic functionalism of M. A. K. Halliday, whose major assumption is remarkably like the major assumption of modern rhetorical theorists like Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth: "The particular form taken by the grammatical system of language is closely related to the social and personal needs that language is required to serve" (142). Fowler shares this basic assumption concerning the important connection between form and ideological interest for "different varieties or registers within one language enshrine variant world views" and "articulation is a social practice, a conscious or unconscious intervention in the organization of society" (*Literature* 8).

Hence, Fowler's social discourse model does not treat literature as a hermetic artifact, but as an articulator of world views (24). The properties of language which reflect the ideology of the writer are the *discourse* elements or the interactional dimensions of texts, including "point of view, the author's rhetorical stance towards his narrators, towards his characters . . . towards his assumed readers" (*Linguistics* 52).

Fowler's illumination of the interactional or interpersonal dimensions of literature provides us with important targets for rhetorical analysis. He observes that "much communication is concerned with establishing and maintaining unequal power relationships between individuals, between institutions and individuals" (*Literature As Social Discourse* 29). To what extent do experimental novels exploit such power imbalances in communication? Do experimental novels reinforce the power of authors over readers by communicative strategies that disarm the critical intelligence of the reader? If literature is not simply a verbal pattern, but an "interaction between speech participants," and the utterance, or written text, indicates "the intended act of the speaker (illocution), his attitude to the propositions he utters (modality) and the orientation of the utterance in space and time (deixis)" (140), then how does the style of the experimental novel fit with, or perhaps contradict, the implicit message regarding ideology presented by the writer? What does the experimental writer's attitude to the reader tell us about the former's world view? Is the reader of an experimental text "liberated"? Is the reader led to a position of compliance, scepticism, or mystification? A formal debate invites rebuttal and confrontation; but a novel of course, unlike spoken language, can only provoke speculation, the rejection of ideas, or their acceptance—never negotiation. Some critics speak of nineteenth-century texts as being "authoritarian": are experimental texts less authoritarian because they advance revolutionary ideas? Do they promote rational inquiry or stifle it?

In analyzing the experimental novel, Fowler says that one must pay attention to how the writer creates a "network of voices at different levels, each presenting a distinct mode of consciousness: the I-figure narrating, the characters, the implied author who controls both narrator and characters, and who often takes a line on them" (*Linguistics* 76). In other words, we must consider the style of the narrator, how characters are presented, and how the beliefs of the implied author are manifested (78). To demonstrate in a practical way how these principles can guide our scrutiny of post-modern rhetoric, I turn to my own rhetorical reading of George Bowering's *Burning Water*.

The Rhetoric of *Burning Water*

We have seen that Bowering's literary theory emphasizes the ludic, antiteleological, and arbitrary dimensions of writing. Does his novelistic

rhetoric also reflect this? *Burning Water* certainly contains postmodern playfulness, aleatory plotting, and self-reflexivity: this metafictional history combines description of George Vancouver's charting of the Pacific coast, humorous speculation on the private lives and conversations of the crew, fanciful depictions of the ironic attitude that the west coast natives might have had to the peculiarities and obsessions of the white explorers, and a self-reflexive story that shows how Bowering, during sabbaticals in Italy and Central America, made a series of accidental "discoveries" that related his experiences to those of the explorer Vancouver. The happy accidents and coincidences in Bowering's own exploration of the Vancouver story are an important part of his method and authorial attitude. In fact, the prepositioned author/narrator attempts to convince us that he is open to random experiences, an honest historiographer, one without predetermined methods, plans, or values: he tries to convince us that he is free from ideological constraints. But although Bowering uses techniques which emphasize his antideterminist and ludic attitude to language, he still inserts causal psychological explanations when describing Vancouver. As well, Bowering is preoccupied with specific types of power conflicts: he has mounted a critique of male modes of competition, militarism, and pride that reflects an ideologically interested position, not an ideologically innocent one. Bowering's postmodern playfulness and ideological innocence—rhetorically constructed through first person interventions and self-dramatization in the third person—are constantly undermined by a psychological probing of Vancouver and by the highlighting of certain types of authority problems.

There are various addresser-addressee levels in *Burning Water*. Bowering is true to his hostility against "transparent" fiction by drawing attention to his own acts of narration: the implied author steps forth in the prologue in the form of an "I" narrator who introduces the reader to his fictional procedures in a casual, affable tone. He prefers to avoid the "I" narrator in the rest of the novel, but he still repeatedly enters in the rest of the novel in this "I" narrator's voice. The prepositioned author attempts to move away from the "you-I" addresser-addressee relationship by referring to himself or dramatizing himself in the third person: he reduces himself to the level of his characters, a "he," while drafting his readers into an intimate company of "we." The levels of addresser-addressee relations include an "I" narrator who is explicitly identified as the implied author, a "he" character who is also the author, and a series of other discourses assigned to

characters like Vancouver, Quadra, and Menzies which are mediated by the implied author/narrator. The implied author directly addresses the reader in the "Prologue." What is his attitude to the reader and what is the goal of this strategy? What is the function of the first person narrator's rhetorical stance?:

> When I was a boy I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. That made me feel as if current history and self were bound together, from the beginning.
>
> When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. He might have felt such romance, sailing for a king named George the Third. What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place?
>
> . . . So I began to plan a novel about us, about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken. Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor. (The "Prologue")

In the prologue Bowering attempts to present himself as an innocent observer of history, one who has not consciously pursued the story of Vancouver's expedition but who has seemingly had the subject brought before him through a series of chance coincidences: name, place, and literary profession have happily mixed to provide him with the opportunity to write of George Vancouver.

Bowering's authorial discourse is designed to elicit our sympathy and disarm our critical attitude. In the first three paragraphs he sets up a distinct temporal progression while simultaneously preserving the random and illogical connections between his identity and the figures around him named George. The syntax of the first two sentences, with their opening subordination that signals the author's careful arrangement and weighing of ideas, promises a logic of progression that is never delivered. Bowering does not move through a discernible hierarchy of stages, but through a series of surprising circularities: the suspense of "When I was a boy" is followed by the banal, "I was the only person I knew who was named George"; the "but" raises our expectations for some interesting antithesis, but we are merely given an unspectacular exception to Bowering's boyhood discovery: "I did have the same first name as the King." The "When . . . but" sentence structure is followed by other paragraph openers that offer the syntactic suspense of an argument ("When . . . so," or "In the . . . so"), but instead

lead us into circular reflection: the suspensive "When I came to live in Vancouver" is followed by the tongue-in-cheek punning, "I thought of Vancouver," and the circular return to names, "so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver." This circularity is repeated: "In the late sixties I was a poet, so I wrote a poetry book about Vancouver and me."

These nominal resemblances and circular musings are supposed to give one the sense that "current history and self" are bound together. Bowering certainly reinforces the postmodernist's subjective attitude to the past: what the present self perceives is all that is important about the past—this is the relativist "presentism" of Bowering's historiography. The poet finds reassuring reminders of his identity through nominal evidence. The lack of finer discrimination and analysis here serves to impress upon the reader the implied author's artlessness and naïvete. In fact, the "When I was a boy" opening sets up a functional tenor of discourse of boyish innocence that is maintained in the remainder of the Prologue.

The implied author's strategy is designed, thus, to emphasize the author's ingenuousness; but the prologue is also an opportunity to promote his historiography: "the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken." Bowering's "fancy," what he imagines happens, is that historical understanding, a conscious relationship to the past, simply falls into the lap of the "chosen" by fortune; he trusts chance and random inspiration. But he also contends that history is a fiction, a social construct that is "made up" by writers: "Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor." Emphasizing random play and social constructionism, Bowering is faithful to postmodern anti-realist and anti-truth doctrines. But he is faithful to his postmodernism in yet another way: he attempts to promote a form of social unity by linking all men to some common denominator; individual differences of time and place, paradoxically, become unimportant in Bowering's subjective world because they are united by similar phenomenological experiences: "So we Georges all felt the same sun, yes. We all live in the same world's sea. We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you ('The Prologue')."

In his prologue Bowering attempts to defuse conventional authorial power through a self-effacing attitude, through acknowledging his subjectivity, through asserting that history is either a random and haphazard collection of facts (whose interpretation is more of a matter of serendipity than rationality) or a biased selection of personally interesting conclusions

and connections from the detritus of history. The implied author hopes to curry favor with the reader, as well, by attempting to convince us that we are participants in this fiction, participants who stand beside him looking at the creation of this historical fiction: he promises to reveal his own history-making process by putting himself into the story as a third person "He." Whether this exposure of the fiction-making process is truly achieved is problematic.

The implied author's other first person intrusions into the story are calculated to display his distrust of authorial omniscience and objectivity. His own twentieth-century postmodern position is opposed to the discussion of "abstract values." He displays his own postmodern transcendence of the eighteenth-century obsessions with "taste, virtue . . . piety, that sort of thing" in a barely restrained sarcasm (24).

First person address often leads the implied author to reiterate his original promise that he would set up his authorial functions not transparently but explicitly; when he comments on the thoughts of Vancouver, he foregrounds his use of the omniscient mode, and comically announces that "novelists have the privilege of knowing everything" (63). Such a reminder serves to draw attention to the fictionality of the novel and demystifies the narrator's authority.

First person intrusions, however, do not always serve to expose the implied author's act of narrating; these intrusions also reinforce the *authority* of his interpretation of Vancouver. Bowering has already admitted his subjectivity; but such an admission is *rhetorically calculated* to win our approval of his honesty and lack of art—this is the rhetorical figure of *paralepsis*, professing to deny that which the author is doing in the act of speaking. He uses rhetorical strategies in the process of declaring his rhetorical innocence. The implied author does set himself up as an authoritative commentator on the life of George Vancouver, a perspective that is supposed to give us true insight into the cause of his quarrel with Menzies, the ship's surgeon and botanist. The implied author presents himself as possessing casually those truths of Western society that Vancouver was just beginning to realize:

> Commander Vancouver wished he could have been winning Nootka back from the French or the Russians, instead of taking it back by agreement from the Spanish. At least the French and the Russians he had no

> trouble disliking. Still, had that been the case, Don Juan would at this moment be home in San Blas.
>
> War may make men go around the world, but love makes the world go around. Actually, any novelist, any man of imagination could have told him that commerce was the moving power behind both. (75)

The implied author as a first person intruder, must carefully insert his interpretation of the causes of the Vancouver-Menzies conflict because he risks breaking the illusion of disinterestedness, the guise of not knowing the truth. In a send-up of a heavily subordinated, left-branching periodic sentence, the implied author seems to catch himself in the act of being an asserter of the truth, then twists away:

> If the truth be known, and of course we are in a position to know it, or whatever purchase one makes on the truth in a work of imagination, if that is what we are engaged in, that being the entire issue we test here, Vancouver did not really have anything against Dr. Menzies. He was really angry at Banks, not his agent. He hated Menzies, that is true, but it was the hatred for an obvious token, not the anger he reserved for the administrator of the Royal Society. Better a botanist than an agent of the fur trade, for instance. (84)

But despite the implied author's attempts to wriggle free from the position of epistemological authority, he cannot help but insert evaluative and interpretive commentary on Vancouver, even if it is in the guise of mediating the thoughts of another character. In fact, when he relays the thoughts of Archibald Menzies the narrator's ironic perspective on both Vancouver's pride and Menzies's rationalism is apparent:

> . . . Archibald Menzies slept in his customary bedclothes, the covers in his hand held to the side of his head, the candle lit beside his last-minute book of physic. He was satisfied to accumulate knowledge. He was an eighteenth-century man.
>
> Not for him the necessity and the pride of that youth [Vancouver] who was *ne plus ultra* and must now be also *rara avis*. (50)

How do the kinds of rhetorical tactics employed by Bowering in the first person narrative mode compare with those in his use of a dramatized third person author? In the first person mode the implied author seems interested in three effects: first, to persuade the reader that he is artless, casual, and is

discovering his "story" through accident; second, that although he has no ideological bias, he is above the abstractions and rational values of the eighteenth-century mind, that he has transcended *their* hypocrisy; third, to draw attention to or foreground the fiction-making process in order to convince the reader further that his method is "honest" and authentic, not a transparent "window," but an open activity in which artifice is exposed. This theoretical self-reflexivity is designed to let the reader know that the author is being open and honest concerning the motives of his fiction, and that the reader will not be entranced by any "illusions" of epistemological authority and objectivity. These effects of the first person intrusions are reinforced by the use of the third person dramatization of his authorial activities. When we read of his sojourn in Trieste, we understand that he is again using the tactic of self-deflation; the fog of the Adriatic that blurs his vision (17) sets up a comparison of himself to the dreamy poet-Indian in the opening scene who imagines ("fancies") that the European ships are giant birds or even the vessels of gods, and who is chastised by an older Indian fisherman: "That is your fancy speaking. That can be very dangerous for people such as us. You must never believe that you have seen a god when you have seen a man on a large boat" (17). Bowering would compare himself to the confused young Indian who is having his vision altered by the more experienced Indian.

Bowering's dramatization of his accidental finding of connections to Vancouver in faraway places is rather more than an illustration of the uses of serendipity. He stumbles upon preserved artifacts, fossil traces, vestiges, echoes and resemblances from Vancouver's time and his surveying of the Pacific. What do these connections mean? Bowering's accidental discovery of connections seems, on the one hand, to embody a faith that "history is given" (as he remarks in the "Prologue"), that the novel "was happening to itself rather than waiting around for him to think of it"(145). But, on the other hand, even while history is disclosing itself to him, Bowering is not simply relaying this information in a transparent form, but has selected, edited, and provided rhetorical filters for, the reception of his story.

The function of Bowering's first person interventions and his dramatization of himself in the third person is to persuade the reader that the implied author is innocent and not rhetorically calculating; his openness and honesty are supposedly markers of a disinterested position. His travel notes attempt to show that historical understanding can be "found" through serendipity, that indeed new discoveries or breakthroughs in knowledge can be arrived

at through accidents. But Bowering deliberately sets up the story of Vancouver as a tragedy of the male will-to-power, a critique of men fighting for dominance. The implied author attempts to win our faith in his self-awareness by being playful and ideologically innocent; yet, his presentation of power and authority shows assumptions about values, and beliefs in causal psychological interpretations of character—interpretations which contradict the postmodern ludism to which Bowering has declared himself aligned. The power preoccupations of Bowering undermine his professed disinterestedness and neutrality: the writer is fascinated by Vancouver's quarrel with Menzies, and with subtly criticizing Vancouver's use of power.

Bowering makes it clear that he believes that male competitive drives are behind Vancouver's expedition. In Bowering's psychological assessment of Vancouver, he emphasizes the commander's hunger for eminence, his need to live up to the example of his father figure, Captain Cook (45), and his quest for historical immortality, a figure in a "famous story" (62). Moreover, the implied author constantly intrudes to emphasize the competitive, agonistic aspects of Vancouver's character; these intrusions are subtly laced with authorial judgment, an implied criticism of the seemingly infantile or boyhood activities, a playing at war that Vancouver has not outgrown.

The implied author's judgment of the follies of male competition is perhaps most strongly represented in the ironic treatment of the Vancouver-Menzies conflict; Vancouver's quarrels with his botanist are rooted in his mentor's previous conflicts with agents of the Royal Society. And Vancouver has even more reason to hate Menzies because of the threat to his authority that the Scotsman presents: as the ship's surgeon, he violates Vancouver's sense of control, for he could "make an estimation of the events transpiring inside" the individual: "He could scan the face and read the vitals, augury that no client can forgive" (73). The implied author is careful to emphasize the competitive nature of Vancouver's relations with Menzies, for Vancouver sees in Menzies all of the talents that he thinks of possessing himself—"intelligent, curious, thorough, disciplined, professional"—mixed with his own pride, "the kind of pride that would not allow him to say 'Yes sir' when he was thinking 'No, sir'" (95). The implied author speaks with a tone of superior insight when he describes the foundation of their hostility to each other:

> Of course the source of the coolness between the two men was complex, but it involved the definition of work and worthwhile activity aboard a military vessel. Vancouver, as was to expected, wanted to be in the Atlantic or the Caribbean, sinking French ships; yet here in the North Pacific he proved his officers and crew the best explorers, navigators and map makers in the world.
>
> Menzies, for his part, was more interested in extending the limits of human knowledge about life than he was in ending it; so he was not averse to cutting into a body to explore and map that shore, even if once in a while he had to end the life of a flying or crawling exemplar. (178)

According to the implied author, there is a causal psychological explanation for the conflict between Menzies and Vancouver, a conflict that so preoccupies the writer in the latter parts of the work that he constructs a fanciful murder climax, with Menzies getting revenge for the destruction of his plant specimens by killing Vancouver with his pistol. I emphasize "fanciful" because here Bowering makes his most blatant digression from what we know about the life of Vancouver—Vancouver ended his life under rather less spectacular circumstances in Surrey, England. By making his conclusion the murder of Vancouver, the implied author moves from ludic postrealism into direct criticism: this implied author sees Vancouver as a tragic example of the male will-to-power, the male competitive mode. The implied author has actually set up the life of Vancouver as a morality play while professing to being objective, an innocent witness to history.

Bowering's postmodem style, registered in the prologue, and through his use of self-reflexive narrators and authorial self-dramatization, connotes the demystification of historical discourse, the opening up and revealing of the storyteller's tricks. However, Bowering's "heracliteanism" and serendipity-approach to history is rendered problematic by his deliberate focus on certain types of male competition and power conflicts. Bowering's interest in exposing certain types of power conflicts, by targetting the male will-to-power, is teleological, argumentative, and didactic; and this is an interest that fits uncomfortably with the postmodem aesthetics of *ludism*.

Rhetorical scrutiny of *Burning Water* shows how shot through with power this work is, how it really mobilizes a serious critique while posing as ingenuous play. The postmodern rhetoric of liberation and open-endedness here does involve the inscription of new authority and new belief.

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