

AARON PECK / On Nuts and Other Editions: The Books in George Bowering's Study

“Books wait. It’s one of their biggest virtues.
They always wait for you.” —Javier Marias

My initial encounters with George Bowering involved books: not those written by him, but physical books, objects that had passed through his hands.

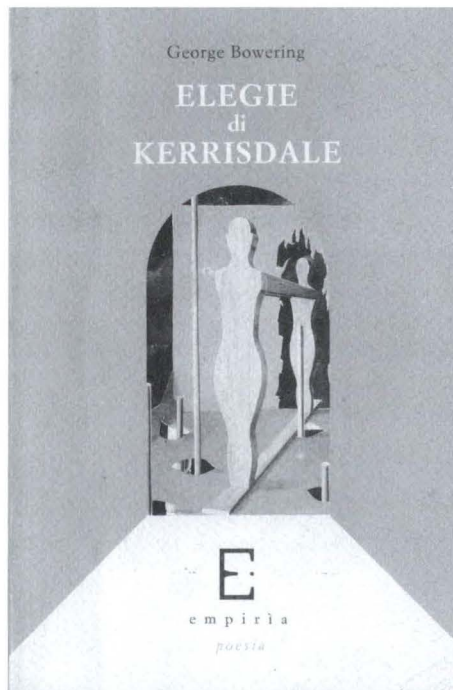
The first, even before I’d met him: my hardcover copy of Louis Zukofsky’s *Complete Short Poetry*, which I was carrying with me when I attended the IntraNation conference at what was then called Emily Carr Institute. A row in front of me, George, almost instinctively, turned around and snatched the book from my hands. “Hey,” he shouted, “I have this book!”

Next, at MacLeod’s Books, a book from his former library: avant-garde Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector’s *Stream of Life*. I assume he must have sold it when he moved out of the Kerrisdale address on the sticker inside—“George Bowering / 2499 W 37 Ave. / Vancouver, BC V6M 1P4.” The address, no doubt, was the one at which he wrote *Kerrisdale Elegies*. I paid eight dollars for *Stream of Life*. The book was in good condition, with a few marginal notes, which I scrutinized. In the forward, written by Hélène Cixous, Bowering has underlined seven lines of text that end with the phrase “language has *already said* everything.” The same phrase is handwritten in the top right hand of the margin. Into the novel and alongside a paragraph that ends with, “He thought it was his mother calling him and he answered, ‘I’m coming.’ He went upstairs but found his mother and father fast asleep,” he writes, “a common occurrence.”

In November 2013, George invited me to his house in West Point Grey to talk about his books—*TCR* had asked me to write about the design of the prize-winning editions. We met in his office, where he keeps all editions of the books he has written. When I told him about my—or *his*—copy of Lispector, how it had his former address and marginalia in it, he chuckled, telling me tales about his old house. He seemed far less unnerved by having his marginalia out in the world than I would be.

In his office, a closet full of bookshelves functions as an archive of his published materials. He keeps two copies of every edition. His wife, Jean Baird, says that at least twenty books have a photograph of him on the cover—*Autobiology* being the first time his image appears—a claim that George does not deny. But he also tells me to notice the artists, most of them friends, who have made work, or whose work George has used, for covers. I counted over twenty-five: *Particular Accidents* has a Jack Chambers image on it; *Flycatcher* a General Idea; and seven books have works by Greg Curnoe, including *At War with the U.S.* with illustrations made specifically for it. Brian Fisher designed the cover for George's 2008 chapbook *Shall I Compare?* only a few years before the artist died. All of these covers indicate, or are extensions of, the close relationships George had with many Canadian artists, both as critic and friend.

George also collects his foreign-language editions. There's a Chinese-language edition of *Burning Water*. This, he says, was an authorized edition; however, somebody (he couldn't recall who) found out about an unauthorized series of Canadian classics published in China, also including Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and *Surfacing*. Of official foreign-language editions, however, George is eager to show me an Italian *Elegie di Kerrisdale*, which he went to Rome to launch.



Elegie di Kerrisdale
(Rome: Edizioni Empiria,
1996), trans. Annalisa
Goldoni.

George has sent his mother, now in her late nineties, a copy of every one of his books. He mischievously tells me how his mother lent his first book to a friend of hers who ran it over. Although it was purportedly accidental, you never know what form criticism might take. More recently, Mrs. Bowering's collection has been sold to the Beinecke, but George didn't mention whether that tire-marked copy made it to Yale.

Among special editions, each book that has won a major award is rebound. George has won the Governor General's award three times: once in 1981 for fiction with *Burning Water*; and twice in the same year, 1969, for poetry with *Rocky Mountain Foot* and *Gangs of Kosmos*. (Was there another time when someone won two awards for two books in the same category in the same year? In today's literary culture, even the suggestion feels scandalous.) I was surprised at how slap-dash and ugly the Governor General Award-winning editions are: the original first edition was rebound in cloth covers, almost indistinguishable from the rebinding that happens at any public library, except for marbled end-sheets. And to be fair: *Burning Water* also has a large nautical wheel affixed to the cover, although the rest of its rebind is in keeping with a kind of drab library quality—in other words, archival but inelegant. Compared to the Governor General Award-winning editions, however, the rebind of *Changing on the Fly*, nominated for the Griffin in 2005, has better binding and was constructed of finer materials. And only for a nominated book! All four of those award-winning or -nominated editions are shelved next to the two copies of their commercial counterparts.

The shelves in the closet also include books that have a Bowering introduction or afterword. There were, to my count, four copies of the 1990 edition of *Swamp Angel* by Ethel Wilson that includes his afterword. When I mentioned the novel, George told me that the cabins outside of Kamloops, on which Wilson based hers in the story, are still there.

George and I both grew up in the Okanagan Valley, at a difference of forty years. He once told me that a diner in Penticton called the Elite, which is known for its hot sauce and pies, is properly pronounced *ee-lite*, not *e-leet*. I thought he was joking, trying to trick me into sounding like a goof. The Elite is a few doors down from one of British Columbia's best used bookstores, The Book Shop. Last time I was in Penticton, after book shopping, I went over to the Elite, ordered a pie, and did some recon. I asked the manager of the Elite about the pronunciation of the name. He said, bluntly, "A few of the old-timers still call it that."

In his study, after finishing the tour of his own titles, George is quick to note other books, those not written by him, stored on the shelves nearest to his desk, all fiction and poetry, such as the novels of Daniel Pinkwater, a children's author he admires. He then diverts my attention to his collection of James Dean magazines, although my eye wanders back to those shelves with an impressive and nearly exhaustive collection of Canadian, American, and European modernist literature. On these, I notice translations of the novels of Nathalie Sarraute, and I ask him about her work. He tells me how, in the 1960s, he was reading a lot of French modernism, her books among others.

Like most libraries, amid the books are collectables, portraits, and mementos. For George, this includes pictures of his family (his father, his mother, his daughter) and of his two heroes (Charles Olson and Shelley), as well as three Hello Kitty dolls, which he pointed out with some glee. In typical Bowering fashion, the *objets d'art* in his library—Hello Kitty dolls—invert the pretention of a guy from the southern interior of British Columbia even having objects in his collection that require such a fancy French loanword. A few shelves over, however, he shows me a eucalyptus nut found in Rapallo, near Ezra Pound's former house.

George claims he has kept track of every book he has read since he was fourteen in notebooks or "scribblers." As of 2 November 2013, when I interviewed him, he had 5,536 entries (the first date, 7/7/59, appears forty-one pages into the first scribbler, with the entry number 955, *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury). He has also published over a hundred titles of his own, depending how you classify some of the chapbooks.

I look around at all of the books in his study, those written by him and those not. One of the fundamental qualities of the book as a physical object is its contingency: you never know where it will end up or how, once there, it will cohere into a collection, into a life; or then what will happen when it is sold or given away. I still have *my* Zukofsky, and *his* Lispector.

While I was visiting, George received an email from the poet Ron Padgett with news of the poet's *Collected Poems*. "Read 'em and weep!" his friend wrote. Padgett's tome is longer than eight hundred pages; George laughs and says that he is one of his favorite American poets. That *Collected* Padgett was already on one of the many piles of books on the floor waiting to be read.

And then he tells me he must get on to reading it.