

The Art of Intelligent Indeterminacy:  
an introduction to Marilyn Bowering's "Human Bodies"

By David Godfrey

In periods of social certainty, and arrogance, the work of the poet often plays the role of an escape valve, a breathing hole cut into the great floes of conformity and sameness which threaten those who have not given in to the common beliefs. Such artists, Rimbaud or Coleridge, are content, for a time, to gravitate to the boundaries of civilization. But in a period such as ours, where only a few certainties are fashionable and indeterminacy has its own critical language and priesthood, the work of the poet, however excellent, is likely to disappear in the fogs of social rant and media banality.

In such a world, Bowering poems provide a mapping towards a hard-won and individual cohesion. Their initial pleasure is in precision of language and deftness of narrative, but this poetry ages well, not least because of the intelligence mind that lies behind it and the ongoing search for compassion and understanding which informs the whole body of work.

The man stands on a platform.

We are born so that we may die, he says.

And I see--

the me that holds an apple and eats it, making a wheel round

the middle, then eating the 'spokes' at each end--

this me is already dead.

After a while he kneels on the red platform carpet showing the  
soles of his shoes.

I lie awake at night. I am here and I am dead,  
just like you Janey when I last saw you.

We know almost immediately where we are and whose story we are momentarily a part of. Although Bowering is always willing to explore uncertainties or the fragilities of our senses and intelligence, she never leaves us without at least one set of slash marks to guide us through the mists and forests.

Chief among these is the importance of character. Bowering poems almost always put us face to face with people: whether it is Marilyn Monroe or Monsieur and Madame Schuyere, Frederyk Chopin or the mysterious Alexi Folchakov, the strange Mr. Cook, maker of people, or the finely sketched and uncatchable Janey, the "child who remembers a ribbon of time." These poems are not simply meditations or commentaries; many of them take their fundamental shape from specific lives, dreams, desires and fears that are rich in variation.

And these characters move through real worlds, resonant with specificity. Bowering never denies the unavoidability of social impact. Like a poetic, one-woman NFB, but without the political bias, she gives full rein to the forces of the world that shape, and distort, character. At times, this is tongue-in-cheek: "The eye is a prism. Mr. Folchakov has one / glass eye which he wears like a medal from the / last war." At times it is ironic:

They screamed: 'Monchant! Monchant!  
Precious Little Girl!'"

It was a kind of confetti  
for mourning:

fires lit on an altar,  
smoke bubbling to Fuji,  
a sweet, sweet scent  
of bombs and mutilation.  
It was the right country to come to  
after the wedding.

At times, it sets emotion against concept:

Here is my body, Lord.  
It melts like wax. It is a candle in the earth.

He said, Give, give, give.

I shall represent for him an Italy  
which one visits and enjoys on spring days  
but where one cannot remain permanently,  
because there is more sunshine than beds and tables.

At times, it shows the wisdom of innocence:

When you are jist a baby they take you.  
They wrap you up in a shawl that belonged to yr granny  
and they take you to the church. It is such a big church,  
with a balcony and a pipe organ  
and pillars lit like they tied Samson to.  
If you sits at a wall end you canna see round the pillars.

So I likes to sit next to the aisle, and I cn turn round and see the  
mommies and daddys when they stand at the back until the preacher  
notices them and he calls out:

Who brings this child?

Ands they answer, We do, and he saus,  
Bring the child forth. And the wee baby is carried up by the Mum,  
but it is the Dad who hands it over when they're at the ffront  
and the Preacher says, Do you dedicate this baby to Jesus?  
The Dad hands you over and the preacher takes you in his big pawas,  
with the congregation lookin in, and that's that.

And at times it merely documents the realities of the tribal community, its horrors

Two soldiers carry the white wrapped lower half  
Of a man.

They have strapped him onto a bar  
(as water carriers would) between them.  
They have made him a seat and toe rest,

Although there is nothing to him above waist level.

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Inside are the "fosses",  
holes dug under roots into the chalk soil  
where 26 years later twenty-seven bodies--  
members of the Resistance--will lie  
(from Grandfather)

or its small joys.

As when the the 1st battalion  
of the West African Frontier Regiment

played, for her, the Hausa Farewell  
as she left Nigeria,

so now there is a salute to be given.

Let the wind give it,  
and the trees.  
(from Eight Poems for Margaret)

Nonetheless, one would never describe these works as value free. Like Yeats, Bowering accepts the poet's need to confront the requirements and imperatives of belief, personal belief as well as community. Her friend Robin Skelton found a magic in books and read profusely; she does also. For scholars, there is probably a life time of work in tracking all the influences and allusions, but the perceptive reader, comparing one poem to another and noting similarities and icons, will find on their own the counter-weights to her diversities, inklings of that driving set of probabilities which both inspire and inform her works, both poetic and fictional. This is a deeper reward of reading Bowering, for this set of probabilities is not a carefully defended potager with the wilderness fitted into rows and squares and triangles, hedged with box, but a trellis work, a scaffolding, capable of expansion and perspective, capable of adding in the unique and the unusual, the mundane and the iconic.

As you read the poems, and compare one to another, you cannot but become aware of the very North American sense of reflective worlds; not a simple division into fact and theory, reality and symbol, artifact and spirit, but a balancing and comparison of worlds, each whole and complete in its own, but each providing reflections on and illuminations of any other and all together. There are

values here, some worth a penny and some worth a pound, but they are not the values of the Preacher, but of the Mum, or of the child herself:

The past and future  
Ahve proven their argument  
Against ours.

Human Bodies comprises six sections. These are collected poems and only small changes have been made to the first five books. The last section contains poems new to this book. Together, they make a cellar of vintage wine. One not to be drunken down in a single riotous night, but to be selected carefully and savoured, depending on time, mood and circumstances.

Anyone Can See I Love You was published in 1987. It remains a model for the poetic rendering of the public person, setting the small mundanities of that very public life against an almost mythic vitalization of the inner life of Norma Jean.

and I want to tell you  
there's a black halo around the world

and a dark angel who is my lover.  
I can't eat,  
I can't sleep,  
But I'm sure to recover.

Also published in 1987, Grandfather Was a Soldier is more than it appears and requires some work on the reader's part. On the surface, it deals with one Canadian soldier out of the 619, 636 who joined up as part of Canada's support of the great imperial misadventure of the century. Deeper down lies a meditation on death and memory. What is it that we remember; how do we remember?

But this is the Somme and there are 1777 unidentified dead  
in one field's small cemetery ... plus  
Adanac, Regina Trench, Moouguet Farm.

Imagine the first ploughing--metal, wire, stone--  
and the first growth ...  
a snail crawls over the back of a gravestone.

Grandson, ghost and guide come together as we move through the cemetery and battlefield. And move apart. A page of the visitor's book is examined, removed, burned. There is an enormity to this past which defeats synthesis. Perhaps the mythic will help provide some cohesion:

Each night  
the river opens her belly and out come  
ducks, a white swan, myriads of dish,  
and a man, dressed in black, with his boat.  
He offers eventual meeting  
with the boundary walkers.

Perhaps not, perhaps there is only the attempt to define or remake one single person:

Even when the sunflowers and sun join  
And the horses whinny becomes the breath of the beast  
outside the flimsy safety of the tent; even when  
we know what we believe, the past and future have  
proven their argument  
against ours.

Experience cannot keep its single thread,  
and a thousand dreams fail--  
as does invaluable love--

but I know your face.

Calling All the World is an intelligent jest, an antidote to too much news of the everyday, a delicacy that Leacock and Pratt might have combined on if they had been present at this moment in time, "...as Mr. Folchakov takes out a telescope to / view Alexander the great rinning alongside a / train as it nears a border."

Even here, however, the search for comprehension and compassion continues. Laika, the moongrel, the mutnik, the the pupnik, the woofnik, struggles to make sense out of this experience and to calm her own fears and terror. Mr. Folchakov struggles also, against time and within memory and imagination. And accepts help from wherever it comes. It is, indeed, Prokoviev who helps them, as well as the woman in blue, as both man and dog move "way beyond your imagining:"

We journey west.

We follow sun and moon.

Ocean leads to land to ocean.

There is just one circle,  
this earth we know.

Love As It Is consists of a series of individual poems plus A Cold Departure, an imaginative reconstruction of the love/relationship of George Sand and Frederyk Chopin. Male and female, dark ships with only the smallest of rigging lights passing at close quarters in a dark night, invisible except for the damage they cause.

One need not fully record all that has been said and done.

Mme Sand can have nothing but good memories of me in her heart, if she ever looks back on the past... it is a fever for which there is no cure in cases where the imagination is so dominant and the victim is let loose on shifting and uncertain ground. Well, they say "even a cypress-tree may have its caprices."

Almost as thought this was a challenge to her, Bowering records with great fidelity the "other" than good memories which Mme Sand certainly did have:

All winter I have watched the light fade,

all spring I have waited fro your hand  
to life me above the round world

like the moon

like the womb that dreamed me,

like the spin  
of a foreign sea.

Although very personal and precise, this poem functions much like a play and benefits from Bowering's involvement with both CBC and BBC in the production of radio/poetic/drama.

Autobiography, 1996, contains the poem I reread most often: The Mind's Road to Love, which, to me, is Blakean in its mirrored simplicity and complexity. Here, Bowering makes clear her long term determination to begin "to think of the actual / existence of things."

Few modern poets could, or would dare to, bring any of the following into their work; only one or two could make it work. Even the titles are indicative of her willingness to take chances.

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A Reflection on Ecstasy and its Limitations

In the mirror of the actual existence of things  
is God,

in so far as He or She has tracked through DNA.  
Therefore, in consideration of this, in all creatures

such as you, that enter my mind through my hands and  
lips

through the open nerve ends of the framework of light  
in which I walk,

through the electrical nature of the universe,  
in you all creatures have entered my heart.

Many of the individual poems in both *Autobiography* and *When I am Dead and My Heart is Weighed down*, it appears to me, from the explorations presented in *The Mind's Road to Love*, as though Bowering has been able to move on to an easier and more graceful representation of life once this major exploration of the emblematic has been completed. How were the People Made? Shares much of the light-hearted irony of *Lekia* and *Mr. Folchakov*, but it also has the range and wit of *Lessing's Shikasta* and a playful reworking of some of the themes and tropes of "west coast" poetry and of Bowering's own symbols:

They were made with a blanket of stars,  
they were drawn across the universe

until they were in shreds.

they were made to open their eyes

in moonlight, they were forced to watch  
starshells and artillery bursts,

they were ordered to re-define light.  
They were wired up to EEG's,

they were cross-referenced with earthquakes

The longer poem, Letter to Janey, is also a work which can be read in counterpoint to in The Mind's Road to Love. There is a narrator and there is Janey, a double, an alter ego, but a being as real, if not more real, than the narrator herself.

Then I do go, Janey, I have to,  
and I come to a hole in the ground--  
a collapsed tunnel.  
Around the rim is dry broken earth,  
dead grass, pale sliced rock;

Go and help her, they say,  
She's hurt.

Life for Bowering is never certain, but never totally terrifying. Imperfect tools though they are, mind and heart must be put to use and are. Realities "slip through the mesh of memory / like a small silver fish" but even as they pass, the poet makes the attempt to turn them into that "ribbon of time" which give us the strength to go down into the quarry yet again, when necessary.

Bowering's is a voice which now goes from strength to strength. Her range continues to grow and the lines appear truer and easier with each work. Like the good Italian wines of Alba, Brunsengo or Carema, the poems improve with age and with comparison. They need to breathe, in your mind. They need to be savoured. Her terrain can be difficult and her references are definitely not all available in her footnotes, but for those who learn to appreciate her many qualities, I suspect these pages will be well-worn and I trust and hope that few books from this printing will last more than a year or so without being "ruined" by notes, reflections and interrogatories. Investors in the crowd are advised to buy a second copy for the vault.

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