Pla(y)giarism

Laurie Ricou

have yet to see Auguste Renoir's "La Balançoire [The Swing]" (1876); the painting is in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay. But as I was readying the material in this issue for the press, I kept remembering it. "The Swing" is compelling because I have "seen" it, except in tiny, poor reproductions, only through reading and teaching George Bowering's "The Swing."

Bowering's lines swing across the page in short arcs: the swing he contemplates is more aesthetic perch than playground challenge. The poet imagines character, and response, and connection. The girl on the swing—she is standing and wears a full-length dress—provokes two male onlookers, apparently painters, toward appreciation and interpretation. The fourth figure, the child, is perhaps the true critic, for whom artist and subject are an undifferentiated whole. In Bowering's interpretation she is the centre of attention, and model, because she alone is not self-absorbed. I love how I can see this painting I have not seen. Its simplicity registers in spare vocabulary, especially in Bowering's affection for terms of speculative imprecision (Impressionist perhaps?): "seem," "could be," "some kind of." The poet sees the unity of forest floor and girl's dress—but his writing reads a difference as "blossoms" morph into "new flowers." Back and forth in the middle of the poem, mood and perspective swing:

She leans coyly

or thoughtfully away
from the two men
with straw hats

Bowering reconsiders, allows two possibilities, drawing the viewer/listener into whole realms of speculation. He takes us beyond beauty and vignette,

outward in circles of speculation, into depths of motivation, into a making of story from nothing but the clasping of empty hands. Because the swing as proposed by Renoir and intuited by Bowering is a place to pose, perhaps to preen, Bowering's poem is a word-study (and work of art) about a work of art about a work of art.

The anxiety of influence is both Bowering's subject and its prompt toward the comic—a game, an acrobatics, a pleasure of visual/textual intersection. In a term that seems to originate in Raymond Federman's novel *Take It or Leave It*, it's pla(y)giarism.

Such is often the case in Bowering's concern with the possibilities of art. He looks to re-examine the most ordinary human speech to revive its undetected poetry; he likes to do so with a celebrated visual artist looking on, or back at him. His most recent book is titled *Vermeer's Light*.

Kerrisdale Elegies is the most extended poetic example. Consider Elegy Five. It was written last, recognized by Rilke as the poem which completed the whole, completed it by being placed at the swing point, at the poem's pivotal, balancing centre. For a discussion of Bowering's playfully free translation of Rilke, it also seems to be the essential poem, because in Rilke's Elegy Five clowns and angels meet and greet one another, and in this elegy Rilke's own relation to, and parody of, another work of (visual) art is most overt.

Wer aber sind sie, sag mir, die Fahrenden, diese ein wenig Flüchtigern noch als wir selbst, die dringend von früh an wringt ein wem—wem zuliebe niemals zufriedener Wille? Sondern er wringt sie, biegt sie, schlingt sie und schwingt sie, wirft sie und fängt sie zurück; wie aus geölter, glatterer Luft kommen sie nieder auf dem verzehrten, von ihrem ewigen Aufsprung dünneren Teppich, diesem velorenen Teppich im Weltall.

But tell me, who *are* they, these acrobats, even a little more fleeting than we ourselves,—so urgently, ever since childhood, wrung by an (oh, for the sake of whom?) never-contented will? That keeps on wringing them, bending them, slinging them, swinging them, throwing them and catching them back; as though from an oily smoother air, they come down on the threadbare carpet, thinned by their everlasting upspringing, this carpet forlornly lost in the cosmos.

(Leishman and Spender translation)

For a few hours,

for a summer,

we think we know them,

these young men in three-coloured caps,

playing

the game of boyhood,

brief on our eves.

Do they play for us,

or are they performing

the ancient demands of their decorated bodies?

They wear their names on their backs, but they wear costumes designed a century past, of gentlemen meeting of a Sunday on the grass.

The white ball acts upon them as a stone in a pool. They run, they bend, they leap, they fall to the patchy green carpet, walled away from the factory city.

Like his particular improvisation, Bowering's general strategy in Elegy Five honours and counters his source text: Rilke reads a work of art in another medium, Picasso's Les Saltimbanques (1905), but Bowering reads a remembered composite artwork made of several baseball games, "the game of boyhood." Static artefact versus vital, continually changing experience. Yet Bowering's choice of detail—"three-coloured caps," "decorated bodies," "costumes" (not "uniforms")—implies the clowns in the painting, as if he is in some way reading Picasso too. The possible freedom of the acrobats is everywhere curbed in Rilke's version of the painting. In Bowering, the note of the elegiac persists, but repeatedly he sees them in a kindlier light. He calls them "young men" with no sense of the homeless that hovers in "Fahrenden"; he introduces them not with a question that implies their lack of identity, but with a sense of shared experience: "we think we know them"; the baseball players may be "brief in our eyes," but they are not themselves "Flüchtige." Most significantly Bowering's young men are not passive mechanisms, but in response to the "white ball" they are multiply active: "they run, they bend, they leap, they fall." Rilke's cosmos, here, seems something of a factory, with its "oily/smoother air" whereas Bowering's baseball "Diamond" is an ecstatic contrast to the "factory city" (66).

One of the most haunting features of *Les Saltimbanques* is that none of the acrobats looks at one another, nor, apparently, at the viewer of the painting. (Again, the characters in "The Swing" come to mind.) And Rilke, as Marion

Faber writes, similarly "isolates them, treating each one in disjunction from the others." So Bowering seems to do for a time, with the "third base coach," and for much of the section devoted to "the young shortstop." But at the focus of the pivotal Elegy Five Rilke places the punning Latin phrase "Subrisio Saltat," "acrobat's smile." For Rilke it is the culmination of another complicated conceit, but the main importance for me is its reminder of the figure of the clown in *Duino Elegies*. "On the young acrobat's face the smile is a defiance of pain, a wondrous affirmation," writes Faber, but it is a smile not a laugh because the "smile encompasses a valuable trace of pain midst ultimate affirmation."

Bowering's Elegy Five ends with the possibility of a "satisfied smile," and his shortstop "play[s] thru [his] injuries" until his "sore body grins" (69). Where his model smiles, Bowering smiles and tries another way. His Latin inscription is "Extra/basis," a "thin fine" pun on the baseball term "extra bases," describing unexpected and unusual progress made in the game, and bases gained other than off the bat. In this single phrase, too, lingers the baseball metaphor that figures Bowering's composition of the *Elegies*. He has an extra-ordinary foundation in Rilke's poem. At the same time he is outside, even beyond the scope of the poem on which his composition is based.

I sit in section nine and sometimes wonder why, but know I am at ground zero where art is made, where there is no profit, no loss.

The planet lies perfect in its orbit. (73)

When the acrobats achieve their finest trick, Rilke detects, so the usual interpretation goes, the nullity of a perfection which is rehearsed into habit. Bowering again goes beyond his basis. Zero is read as that point directly beneath a nuclear explosion, that point which must be part of any post-modernist's middle-aged elegy. But the section ends with the planet's perfect orbit. The difference between Rilke's acrobats and Bowering's baseball players may here be implied. In baseball the endless practice prepares the player not for the emptiness of a routine trick, but so that he might with spontaneous finesse execute the play that has never been made before. So, too for Bowering in the game of poetry, which is life.

Pla(y)giarism, as it is often celebrated in poeming of the visual arts, is another form of stealing bases. Writing is an infinite series of translations. And translation finds the language of icon and image growing into worded language and back again.

Reciprocally, one of Rilke's most quoted phrases makes an appearance in Lawren Harris' notes as he looks for words to understand the reading of his work:

Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them.

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As I complete this Editorial in the first week of July 2007, the Editor's privilege has just passed to Margery Fee. The same week, her exceptional scholarship was recognized by selection as Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Peter Wall Institute of Advanced Studies. Margery's work focuses on Canadian English, Aboriginal studies, and postcolonial studies. Students of Canadian literature are very fortunate that a scholar of such range and accomplishment has agreed to take on the responsibility of editing Canadian Literature as it now approaches its 50th anniversary (2009).

I would like to thank the hundreds of colleagues who have helped during my term as Editor. The Editorial Board has been generous with time and advice. Réjean, Laura, Kevin, Glenn, and Judy—our Associate Editors—have done so much to keep the journal vital and changing, although their contributions are usually invisible to readers. I especially want to thank the staff members who have made my job much easier, but also who filled it with good humour—particularly Kristin, Laura, Melanie, Beth, Matthew, Susan Fisher, and our exceptionally dedicated Managing Editor, Donna Chin. —LR