

# Pla(y)giarism

Laurie Ricou

I 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 verlorenen  
Teppich im Weltall.

But tell me, who *are* they, these acrobats, even a little  
more fleeting than we ourselves,—so urgently, ever since childhood,  
wring 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)





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.

\* \* \*

*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*