

# Imagining History: The Romantic Background of George Bowering's *Burning Water*

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History as a discipline begins with the separation of fact from mythology. The separation is inevitable and often useful, but it creates at least as many problems as it solves; for history is not the facts but the attempt to understand them, and the historian's approach to understanding inevitably involves inference, speculation, and imagination—the roots of that mythology which he has tried to ban. The facts and the imagination are both essential, but the mixture is volatile and the possibilities of error are endless. Moreover, since historical hypotheses cannot be verified, the idea of historical “knowledge” is problematic at best.

Modern literature has been much concerned with the question of whether we perceive reality or create it in our minds. It is hardly surprising, then, that history and the nature of historical explanation have been central metaphors of fiction in our century. In Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, the *locus classicus*, Quentin Compson and his Harvard roommate Shreve, a Canadian, try to piece together the story of the Sutpen family's rise and fall: in doing so, they embroider the few available facts according to their own needs and desires. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is forced to listen to Mr. Deasy's chauvinistic distortions of history, and has had his own vision of history as “the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame.”<sup>1</sup> Many novelists go a step further and deal with historical subjects. Writers as diverse as Ford Madox Ford and John Fowles, Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov, Norman Mailer and Elsa Morante, have written “historical” fiction which probes the relationship of truth and imagination.

George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980) is an ambitious and largely successful treatment of the nature of imagination in Coleridgean terms. The story of George Vancouver's exploration of the west coast of North America becomes, in Bowering's hands, an exercise in historical reconstruction, an

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 37-41, 30.

analysis of imagination in life and art, and an essay in post-modern self-consciousness. It is a tribute to Bowering's skill that these ponderous themes are handled in a way which respects their complexity but does not interfere with the forward movement and exuberant comedy of the narrative. There are, in fact, two narratives. The story of Vancouver's voyage is interrupted frequently by the story of Bowering's writing. At work on his novel in Trieste, Bowering goes out for a while and returns to find that the narrative "[seems] crazy."<sup>2</sup> The "seems" is important, for *Burning Water*, like all novels, is both crazy and sane, true and false. To discover why, we need to focus first on the story of Vancouver.

The novel's terms of discussion are set up in the first of several very funny dialogues between two Indians who are looking at Vancouver's ships. The first Indian is young and likes to think of himself as an artist, perhaps because he is incompetent as a woodsman; he sees the ships as "two immense and frighteningly beautiful birds upon the water. . . . Their huge shining wings are folded and at rest" (14). The second Indian, who is older and has little patience with the pretensions of the younger, explains what ships are and makes a distinction which will be explored in the rest of the novel:

"I am discrediting only your fancy. Your fancy would have the fish leap from the water into your carrying bag. But the imagination, now that is another matter. Your imagination tells you where to drop your hooks." (16)

The terms are, of course, Coleridge's. For Bowering's purposes, the distinction is essentially between idle dreaming and real perception. Fancy indulges our desire for the strange and exotic but is unattached to anything in the real world; imagination, on the other hand, respects fact, seeks it out, and extends our understanding of it.

Real advances in science, therefore, depend as much on imagination as the arts do, and we might reasonably expect Menzies, the scientist in *Burning Water*, to be a figure of imaginative perception. As a botanist, he is a gatherer and classifier of facts, and he is able to draw more than mechanical conclusions from his observations. It is Menzies who figures out the significance of the Indians' totem poles and the Hawaiians' crop-burning (43, 86). He is also able to infer—correctly—how the Indians came to North America and why the Spanish maps of the Pacific

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<sup>2</sup> George Bowering, *Burning Water* (Toronto: Musson, 1980) 18.

show a set of islands no-one else has ever seen (111, 201). Menzies is a sympathetic character in several scenes, and he is always presented as curious and open-minded.

Nevertheless, he is not a figure of imagination and is finally hostile to it, as his shooting of the albatross shows. Through this act he is, obviously, associated with the Ancient Mariner's crime against God and nature; Bowering has in mind not only Coleridge's poem but one of the best known interpretations of it—George Whalley's essay "The Mariner and the Albatross" (1947).<sup>3</sup> *Burning Water* is dedicated to Whalley, who demonstrated, through careful comparison of motifs in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Coleridge's autobiographical writings, that Coleridge identified himself with the Mariner, and that the albatross represents, on one level, the imagination. The Mariner's killing of the albatross is analogous to Coleridge's sense that he was in some way responsible for the waning of his own poetic ability. Whalley wisely refrains from specifying what Coleridge's "sin" was, and Coleridge himself does not seem to have been specific about it. Certainly he felt guilty about his opium habit and the related failure to finish most of the projects he began: two of his three most famous poems ("Kubla Khan" and "Christabel") are unfinished, and Coleridge's career was notoriously littered with plans and promises of books which never got written.

In *Burning Water*, there are more specific indications as to the nature of Menzies' crime against imagination. He shoots the albatross with a French pistol made "about 1725," and Vancouver notes "the utter lack of expression on his surgeon's face as the dead creature slammed to his planks" (165). Menzies is an agent of the Royal Society, and the pistol can plausibly be associated with eighteenth-century French rationalism: Menzies is not only unmoved by the albatross's death, but immediately begins to dissect the bird. "Dr. Menzies soon had it cut into several new shapes, examining it for everything from diet to diseases of the talons. A thoroughly unsuperstitious man, Dr. Menzies, and when he saw what was in the creature's craw, he simply noted it into a commonplace book, with nary a thought for augur" (87). He is thus quite literally guilty of the crime which Wordsworth uses as a metaphor:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect

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<sup>3</sup> George Whalley, "The Mariner and the Albatross," *Studies in Literature and the Humanities: Innocence of Intent*, ed. Brian Crick and John Ferns (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1988) 18-34.

Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.<sup>4</sup>

Menzies has shown, to some extent, the ability to watch and receive—to note phenomena and derive from them a more than mechanical conclusion—as with the totem poles and the crop-burning mentioned earlier. What he lacks, however, is a sense of awe or reverence for life; a mystery to him is not a source of wonder, but merely an unanswered question. In his rage to understand, he fails to realize that truth is a living thing which is destroyed by the very attempt to hold it still. The point is one which is eloquently made by Joyce Cary in *The Horse's Mouth*, and the example is again the killing of a bird. Gully Jimson defends his lying by saying that “when you tell the truth, you kill it. And it changes into something else. Into a corp. I once shot a kingfisher with a catapult. Knocked him off a twig into a bunch of reeds. And he looked like a piece of cheap satin”.<sup>5</sup> Menzies similarly “misshapes the beauteous forms of things.” Even while making love with an Indian woman, he notes the local flora, pictures himself with another woman, and like an eighteenth-century Kurtz, imagines “brown heads on stakes” (115).

Menzies' punishment for killing the albatross is not as dramatic as the Ancient Mariner's, but it is just as severe: he is punished by being what he has made of himself. It is clear that he remains a killer spiritually, for, on the last page of the novel, he kills Vancouver. As with the albatross, he misses the first time and succeeds with his second shot. The implied parallel with the albatross suggests that Vancouver may be the hero of imagination brought low by rationalism. Vancouver is certainly a “tragic” character, insofar as the term is applicable in a novel like *Burning Water*, but his tragedy is one of unfulfilled ambition. “He wanted to be a famous story very much, the kind of story that is known before you read it. He wanted his name and exploits to be a part of the world any Englishman would walk through” (62-63).

The desire for fame is not reprehensible in itself, particularly in one who is aware of the great navigators of the past. But

<sup>4</sup> “The Tables Turned.” *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbyshire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947) 4: 57.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Cary, *The Horse's Mouth* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1948) 119.

Vancouver is not living in the heroic age of exploration, which could be said to have ended with his mentor, Captain Cook. Cook was to explore and claim new territories for the Crown; Vancouver's mission is "to chart the coast, be friendly but firm with the Spanish, and if he had any time left over, keep an eye open for gold and the Northwest Passage" (26). He wants to fight the French and do great deeds for England, but is uneasily aware that his job is simply to make accurate maps. Part of his problem, then, is that he has been born out of his time. The eighteenth century increasingly is being governed, not only by rationalism, but by pragmatism and commercial needs. Vancouver's maps are necessary, among other things, for the conduct of trade, and Vancouver despises trade (75, 142).

But even to be born in a soulless age is not an obstacle to a man of real imagination. Bowering makes this point implicitly in his references to William Blake, who was born the same year as Vancouver (1757).

[English writers in the eighteenth century] spent a lot of time . . . commenting about abstract values they all professed to sharing and accused one another of mishandling. I mean taste, virtue, honesty, modesty, piety, that sort of thing. . . . Painters were making canvases to surround people with values. A country scene depicting humility might be across the room from a battle scene depicting patriotism. The human being in the middle of the room might feel that he was being clad in a second suit of clothes.

Well, William Blake took all the clothes off again, the first English artist to do so in God knows how many years . . . That is, Blake was saying that everything worth representing can be represented by the human form, created first of all by God. Sometimes some awful things can be represented. King Nebuchadnezzar II, big and naked, on his knees, eyes bulging, a wild grass eater. It never seemed that terrible when they just read about it in the Bible.

One time, some of William Blake's drawings were brought into the rooms of King George the Third, a monarch who had a reputation for encouraging the arts.

When they were shown to him, he looked as you always look at the works of a new artist. Then he looked again and his royal bearing slipped for good.

"Take them away! Take them away!"

That's exactly what he shouted, and that was it for the art of the day. (24-25)

Blake's vision is intense enough to break through the received forms of the age, and he remarks later that the king "understood the drawings at once, and that is why he shouted what he did" (160).

This is immediately relevant to Vancouver's situation. A few pages after the first reference to Blake, Vancouver wakes up in the middle of the night and sees a dark figure standing at the foot of the bed. "The eyes were looking at him with a calm desire to see. [Vancouver] screamed. He heard screams even before he could locate them in his own throat. Even then he screamed again, and again, he continued screaming, to get it out, to get it completely out" (39). The figure he has seen is himself, and what appalls him is not the sight of his own ghost, but the idea of being seen, even by himself. Blake's vision of primal reality, of the self stripped naked, is as terrifying to George Vancouver as to George III. Vancouver is thus at a double disadvantage: he lacks Blake's intensity of vision and he avoids self-knowledge.

Afraid of inner reality—his own or that of the external world—Vancouver is left with surfaces, which he then chronicles. Becoming a cartographer is essentially an act of despair; the imagination needs facts, but facts by themselves are dead—in the words of Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Vancouver's lack of vision is emphasized by his indifference to religion: he does not find it necessary to have a chaplain for the crew (85). This last detail is particularly important, for the religious impulse is not disposed of, but merely displaced. If Vancouver is, as Menzies says, "the greatest pessimist of us all" (218), he nevertheless retains a nostalgia for the transcendent; and, lacking a religious or visionary outlet for it, becomes "the central figure in his own faith" (180).<sup>6</sup>

He thus recapitulates in himself much of the eighteenth century—the loss of belief, the growth of science, the deification of the newly powerful self. Vancouver is, in an unconscious and almost farcical way, a Faustian or Satanic figure, overreaching himself and attempting to displace God. The fact that he seems

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<sup>6</sup> The First Indian notes that Vancouver "had no madness in him, none at all" (240)—i.e. he lacked the divine madness of the visionary or the poet. It should also be noted that Vancouver's love of fact is less than absolute: he refuses, for example, to accept the fact that the Spanish probably discovered the Sandwich Islands a century before Cook (202).

inadequate to such a serious role is part of Bowering's irony, but there is no doubt that the symbolic parallels are intended. Vancouver is referred to several times as "*ne plus ultra*"—a man who goes as far as it is possible to go: "When H.M.S. *Resolution* had reached as close as it could to the South Pole in 1772, just before it turned again north and westward, fourteen-year-old Vancouver had raced to take up his position in the bow, a young *ne plus ultra*. For years he would harbour the ambition to be the closest mortal to the other pole as well."<sup>7</sup> Here again Coleridge provides the essential gloss, in his poem "Ne Plus Ultra":

Sole Positive of Night!  
 Antipathist of Light  
 Fate's only essence! primal scorpion rod—  
 The one permitted opposite of God!—  
 Condensed blackness and abysmal storm  
 Compacted to one sceptre  
 Arms the grasp enorm—  
 The Interceptor—  
 The Substance that still casts the shadow Death!—  
 The Dragon foul and fell—  
 The unrevealable,  
 And hidden one, whose breath  
 Gives wind and fuel to the fires of Hell!  
 Ah! sole despair  
 Of both th' eternities in Heaven!<sup>8</sup>

This is not merely a description of the Devil, but of evil affirmed as a value—"Positive of Night." The same idea is expressed in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*:

. . . besides that dissolution of our earthly tabernacle which we call death, there is another death, not mere negation of life, but its positive Opposite. And as there is a mystery of Life and an assimilation to the Principle of Life, even to him who is *the Life*; so is there a mystery of Death and an assimilation to the Principle of Evil . . . a fructifying of the corrupt seed, of which Death is the germination.<sup>9</sup>

This has much to do with an accurate reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and therefore with our reading of *Burn-*

<sup>7</sup> The phrase *ne plus ultra* is repeated on 48, 50, and 136.

<sup>8</sup> *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford, 1912) 431.

<sup>9</sup> (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1825) 316. ("Comment" to Aphorism XIX of the "Aphorisms on That Which Is Indeed Spiritual Religion.")

*ing Water*, but it remains rather abstract. Coleridge was moved to comment in more concrete terms by the following passage in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, another voyage narrative:

But my ill fate pushed me on now with an obstinacy that nothing could resist; and though I had several times loud calls from my reason, and my more composed judgment, to go home, yet I had no power to do it. I know not what to call this, nor will I urge that it is a secret overruling decree that hurries us on to be the instruments of our own destruction, even though it be before us, and that we rush upon it with our eyes open.

Coleridge's gloss on this passage is as follows:

When once the Mind in despite of the remonstrating Conscience has once abandoned its free power to a haunting Impulse or Idea—then whatever tends to give depth and vividness to this Idea, or indefinite Imagination, increases *its* despotism and in the same proportion renders the Reason and Free Will ineffectual. Now fearful Calamities, Sufferings, Horrors, & Hair breadth Escapes will have this effect, far more than even sensual pleasure & prosperous incidents. Hence the evil consequences of Sin in such cases instead of retracting and deterring the sinner, goad him on to his Destruction. This is the moral of Shakespear's *MacBeth*: and this is the true solution of this Sph—not any overruling decree of Divine Wrath, but the tyranny of the Sinner's own evil Imagination which he has voluntarily chosen as his Master.<sup>10</sup>

These passages only confirm what is clear in *Burning Water* itself. Vancouver has lost, or never had, the power of visionary or religious insight. He therefore affirms and takes to extremes the only kind of "imagination" he does have—the malign "companionship of the facts" (56)—and becomes "the premier sea surveyor of our age," as Menzies calls him (218). Since facts without vision are dead, Vancouver is in fact seeking death, and his rejection of life is apparent in a number of ways. He hangs two Hawaiians without real evidence that they are guilty of murder (202), and takes sadistic pleasure in the flogging of seamen (121, 187). More significantly, he has "gone to war with his body"

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<sup>10</sup> Defoe, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, 5 Vols. (London and Princeton, N.J.: Routledge and Kegan Paul/Princeton University Press, 1984), 2: 160. I am indebted to Peter Sims, whose seminar notes drew my attention to this passage and that from *Aids to Reflection*.



(207) and suffers from hyperthyroidism, hypertension, and consumption.

Vancouver is, then, a figure of failed or false imagination. As such, he is similar to Menzies in many ways: both are engaged in scientific endeavours, both are destroyers of life, and, most importantly, both are following the examples of more original minds. Vancouver's mentor and father-figure is Captain Cook; Menzies' is the botanist Banks, who was on Cook's ship. The conflict between Vancouver and Menzies in some ways re-enacts the differences between Cook and Banks: even in personal relations, the second generation is derivative. Another reason for their dislike of each other is, of course, the very fact of their similarity: "Vancouver had been told by Don Juan Quadra that a man only hates his own defects discovered in another" (98).<sup>11</sup>

Vancouver's desire for greatness makes him "heroic," and his failure makes him "tragic," but he is, in Bowering's narrative, very much a twentieth-century hero. What this means in practical terms is that his odyssey does not result in enlightenment. Like Edward Ashburnham in *The Good Soldier* and Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*, Vancouver undergoes his adventures without any real sense of what they ultimately mean. His ironic role as questing hero is in keeping with Bowering's theme of failed imagination. Vancouver's situation is more poignant in that he responds to the imagination, albeit in contradictory and finally self-defeating ways. He is staunchly English and Protestant, but is intrigued by Spanish and Catholic customs. During dinner on a Spanish ship, he thinks

how easily the word imagination tripped off a Catholic tongue. That ease seemed to be connected somehow with the flashy Iberian uniforms and the silver and gold of the dinner service in the tiny dining room here aboard the *Sutil*. (154)

Catholicism, which embraces the arts to a far greater degree than Protestantism, is represented in the novel as a powerful imaginative force:

The Catholics murdered [the Indians] by the thousands, sacked their cities, defiled their holy places, erased their alphabets, melted down their gold, and brought half-breeds upon their women. But somehow the Catholics made greater

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<sup>11</sup> Vancouver and Menzies are also the same age, "the only two gentlemen on the ship to have reached their middle thirties" (99).

inroads into the lives of the Indians than any Protestant, explorer, conqueror, or settler, ever did. The Iroquois and the Aztecs became part of the global village that is the Catholic church at its rites, but one would look far and wide before coming upon a Redskin who professed to be a Nonconformist, much less an Anglican. (166-67)

But Vancouver's patriotism and restraint prevent him from acknowledging the genius of Catholicism or of Spain.

Another aspect of Vancouver's problematic relationship with imagination is his homosexuality. As something outside the norm, it represents a new world and a chance for original exploration, unlike his derivative and mechanical charting. Further, since this new world is also an aspect of himself, there is a chance that Vancouver may overcome his fear of seeing himself as he is. The positive associations of this motif are reinforced by the Indian's attitude towards it. Having noticed that there are no women on the white men's ships, the two Indians who act as the novel's intermittent chorus come to a logical conclusion: the white men have sex with each other.

"We have our own men who like to fuck each other," [the first Indian] said at last.

"But they are not many. They are a minority, an exception to our ways. They are usually artists and designers and sometimes teachers. The *Mamathni* are presumably all that way."

"Maybe when men fuck men all the time it makes their skin turn pink."

"Maybe when men fuck men all the time they learn the lore that takes them great distances on winged homes filled with useful objects made of iron." (148)

Vancouver has an affair with Quadra but cannot be said to have grown through love, and the reason for his failure shows the centrality of imagination in life as well as art. He is essentially a solipsist who inhabits a private world; as Menzies notes, Vancouver learns the islanders' tongue "in order to practise your control over them, while you never get close enough to them to listen to that language for a while and find out what they want" (150). That self-centredness precludes real involvement with another person, just as it prevents any understanding—imaginative or otherwise—of the external world. Vancouver's solipsism originates, paradoxically, in his refusal to face his own humanity and flaws; lonely and insecure, he creates a "perfect" self whose rigidity antagonizes everyone around him and increases his iso-

lation. As one of his lieutenants says, Vancouver "aches for perfection out of loneliness. He is unbending" (227).

Here again, Coleridge provides an interesting parallel in one of his glosses to *The Ancient Mariner*:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural home, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.<sup>12</sup>

Whalley interprets this beautiful passage as a metaphor of the reader's desire for the poetic world of the imagination:

If we wish to come to that universe of value, intensely human and beautifully organized, we follow the process sketched out by Coleridge . . . 'that willing suspension of disbelief-for-the-moment that constitutes poetic faith.' We decide not to say no; we reject indulgent fantasy; we cross the threshold into a country that is at once strange and familiar; we behave, not like marauding hooligans or philistine tourists, but like guests, according to ancient custom, because this is our own country. By coming here we come to ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

Vancouver never discovers his own country. His "loneliness and fixedness" result in a triple failure: he can neither come to himself, nor embrace others, nor achieve imaginative vision. After Quadra's death, he is "utterly and perfectly now alone" (249), and therefore spiritually dead. Vancouver's symbolic role as albatross is genuine, but as he himself suggests, he is an albatross already dead, a stifled imagination. "Will you want me round your neck till I fall?" he shouts to Menzies, (258) whose pistol merely completes what Vancouver himself began. Since the two men are so similar, the shooting can be seen as a form of symbolic suicide, like Humbert's murder of Quilty in *Lolita*. The murderous intelligence of rationalism finally turns on itself.

If neither Menzies nor Vancouver is a hero of imagination, there remains the possibility that Bowering is. His writing of the

<sup>12</sup> Gloss to lines 263-66.

<sup>13</sup> "Literature: An Instrument of Inquiry," *Studies* 214.

novel is its subplot, and more space is devoted to him than to any character except the two already discussed. Like Vancouver, Bowering is attempting to go beyond the known (in his case, the historical facts) in order to discover reality; as an author, he is aware of the analogies between voyaging and writing.

Two nights ago, he'd told a student of literature that he thought that imagination implied a travelling, or a trip. . . . He said that a passive leaning on a rail and seeing what the coast provides for one's gaze is linear, foppery and fancy. Going there and looking, turning over a rock or a clam, that is what is meant by the imagination. The ship is the vessel of metaphor, a carrying across as they say. (166)

In post-modern fiction, the presence of the author serves merely to draw attention to the artificiality of the work of art. By interrupting our willing suspension of disbelief, it makes an obvious point and spoils the reader's fun—the traditional fun, at least, of absorption in the narrative. These authorial interruptions have become a cliché of post-modern fiction, but Bowering's use of the device is engaging. His interruptions are usually funny, and, more importantly, they are thematically apt. Through them, the reader becomes involved in a second drama of imaginative endeavour.

It is difficult to say whether Bowering, as author-within-the-novel, succeeds. He finishes the job, but he also draws a number of parallels between himself and Vancouver which suggest common limitations as well as common goals. They are both named George; they are both alone (217); they are both obsessed with eating and even eat the same things (66). Just as Vancouver follows in Cook's footsteps, so Bowering follows mentally in Vancouver's own. His physical journey—the travelling implied by imagination—is to Trieste and Central America, but he finds his material slipping away from him:

He thought that if he crossed the seas eastward and set up in an utterly foreign and rather dull north coast city that he would enter the job without any distraction. Instead, he found that the story was less real than it would have been otherwise, that only the distractions were real and seized upon. The imagination, too, fails. Or finds it very difficult to find footing where the fancy has sent it sailing. (26)

On two occasions he finds the narrative "crazy" (15, 80). More ominously, there are several suggestions that Bowering, like

Vancouver, is a *ne plus ultra*: "he always seemed to be at some geographical or marine end of something" (217). At other times, the omens seem to favour him:

All at once he set down his pen and looked at the beginning of the Chinese notebook called "Sailing Boat NB 2220 h." It was all coming together in the way he loved—this had happened other times, and when it did he flew before the wind. He turned to the beginning of the Sailing Boat notebook and saw that he had landed in Trieste and begun writing on All Saints' Day. (80-81)

Vancouver's ship, by contrast, sets sail on All Fools' Day. But even when the omens are favourable, we are never allowed to forget the limitations of fiction: the logo of Bowering's Chinese notebook is reproduced on the first page of each of the novel's three sections (11, 89, 171).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, of course, the question of whether Bowering has succeeded is not for Bowering, inside or outside the novel, to decide. But there are intriguing clues in the structure of the novel as to how he feels about the possibility of success in any imaginative work. At the heart of the novel is Bowering's audacious flight of imagination—the literal ascent of Vancouver's ships and their sailing east above the clouds to Hudson's Bay.

Then he felt the bow of the *Discovery* go up, and the surge of power as the sails caught and the waters dropped below and behind them. He braced himself while the craft bumped through the rocky air above the first peaks of the Coast Range. He saw the *Chatham* break through the cloud cover, and a few seconds later they were enveloped in grey cloud that turned white, and then they were through. The sun shone white over the miles and miles of cumulus, and picked out the moisture shining on the sails of the two ships alone in all that fluffy sea, coursing eastward effortlessly now, at home in the jet stream.

(134)

In some ways, this appears to be a real act of imagination. It is beautifully realized; it is based on fact—on Bowering's own air travel (91, 106); and it aptly symbolizes both the yearning for the Northwest Passage and the role of imagination in scientific ad-

<sup>14</sup> On the issue of authorial self-consciousness, see Linda Hutcheon, "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 30 (Winter 1984-5): 228-38, which includes a brief discussion of *Burning Water*, and Smaro Kamboureli, "Burning Water: Two Stories/One Novel: Narrative as Exploration," *Island* 10 (1981): 89-94.

vances such as manned flight. But the scene is unrelated to the facts of Vancouver's voyage, and cannot be integrated with the rest of the narrative; it is never alluded to after it supposedly occurs. We are therefore inclined to think of the scene as fanciful rather than truly imaginative, wish-fulfilment rather than true perception.

These ambiguities are important because of the scene's position in the novel. It occurs in Chapter 30, and there are twenty-nine chapters on either side of it; it is thus literally the centrepiece of the work, and its problematic status as an imaginative emblem becomes thematically significant. Even if we overlook the ambiguities and think of the flight scene as unqualifiedly imaginative, there remain difficulties, for the novel's symmetry around this centre is less perfect than it appears: there are indeed fifty-nine chapters, but Chapter 52 does not exist. This fact may represent nothing more than game-playing on Bowering's part, but I believe he is making a serious point which underlies much of both narratives in *Burning Water*.

Yeats wrote that "The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life or of the work,"<sup>15</sup> but he knew that neither is really possible. Vancouver is an extremist, a *ne plus ultra* who rejects real awareness of his imperfect self and sets out to make perfect maps. He becomes, as a result, rigid and solipsistic. We are told that "sometimes a twangle of a thousand instruments seemed to hum around his ears" (82), and the implied equation of Vancouver with Caliban, though severe, is not inaccurate.<sup>16</sup> Like Caliban, he is finally baffled and enraged by a world that refuses to submit to his limited powers of understanding. Even his maps are compromised when he is unable to explore one bay to its head, and the "dream of perfection. . . . [disappears] behind an ice-laden cloud" (232).

Bowering faces many of the same problems in trying to create a work of art about a historical person. He wants it to be perfect—historically accurate and novelistically alive—but is aware that his goals are contradictory: the attempt to animate a historical figure, in historiography or in fiction, inevitably involves as much creation as re-creation, and the result will contain as much of the author as of the subject. When Bowering is hungry, Vancouver's crew eats. The novelist is omnipotent and unaccountable, and therefore runs the risk of becoming as rigid, arbitrary and self-absorbed as Vancouver. The "real" world of

<sup>15</sup> "The Choice," *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 278.

<sup>16</sup> See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* ii.

Vancouver, his mind and his times, remains finally closed to the novelist, who must accept his own status as creative Caliban.<sup>17</sup> The perfect work of art is a mixture of incompatible elements, an impossibility like "burning water."<sup>18</sup>

And yet the impossible does occur. Works of art are imperfect, but those that succeed come so close to perfection that the opposed elements in them are balanced and reconciled—fact and fiction, past and present, subject and object. What was a simple impossibility becomes an oxymoron or a paradox. The deliberately flawed symmetry of Bowering's novel merely acknowledges that no success is absolute. As author-within-the-novel, Bowering is clearly more successful than Vancouver, but they share a triumph on the last page of the novel. Vancouver, who has earlier been aware that "he could quietly slip his legs over the side and let his body fall into the retreating tide, and the world of affairs or the parlours of Albion would never notice the splash" (62), is shot by Menzies. But his work is done and his fame is assured: although his greatest dreams remain unrealized, he will be the "famous story" he has longed to be. His death is the fulfilment of his death-wish, but it is also, dramatically, the icing on the cake—as colourful an exit as any legend could want. He even seems to get divine help:

Vancouver pulled himself to his feet, and then full of pain, leaned upon the rail. A gust of wind punched into the mainsail, and every man took a little shuffling step to stay erect, save their captain who seemed to be lifted by some strength

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<sup>17</sup> The parallels between Vancouver and Bowering include their shared sense of being latecomers or followers. Vancouver's role as Cook's protégé is one of the causes of his anxiety about himself; Bowering's awareness of previous novelists—particularly the great moderns—has a similar effect on his attitude toward writing as it appears in *Burning Water*. The link between the two—also developed in Bowering's long poem "George, Vancouver" in *The Catch* (Toronto: McClelland, 1976)—is another means of emphasizing the role of imagination in life as well as in art. An interesting study of *Burning Water* could be made using Harold Bloom's ideas about the "anxiety of influence" and writers' need to destroy their predecessors. Vancouver contemplates cannibalism after recovering Cook's body (126); Bowering cannibalizes earlier writers through quotation and allusion.

<sup>18</sup> Bowering's title alludes to two stanzas of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Poems 191, 187):

About, about, in reel and rout,  
The death-fires danced at night;  
The water, like a witch's oils,  
Burnt green, and blue and white. (127-30)

Her beam bemocked the sultry main,  
Like April hoar-frost spread;  
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,  
The charmed water burnt away  
A still and awful red. (287-271)

The novel's title is also, of course, a "poetic" description of water in sunlight, and probably also a reference to gonorrhoea.

unwitnessed, over the rail and into the unsollicitous sea. (258)<sup>19</sup>

At the same moment, Bowering completes his novel, which ends without returning to the story of his writing it. Like the artist-god of Stephen Dedalus, Bowering is "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."<sup>20</sup>

This disappearance of the author is one of the aspects of modern realistic fiction which Bowering has criticized.<sup>21</sup> His dissatisfaction with the conventions of verisimilitude is a matter of record, and *Burning Water* can certainly be read as fiction that "insists on being seen as an invented, made-up entity."<sup>22</sup> Shortly before the end of the novel, for example, one of the two Indians says, "I liked that Bam Goober fellow pretty well" (239). The distortion of the name is amusing, but it also gives Vancouver the initials B.G.—the reverse of Bowering's own. This draws attention again to the similarities and differences between them, and reminds us in standard post-modern fashion of the novel's status as a subjective creation, not an absolute revelation. At the same time, we should not overestimate Bowering's estrangement from traditional fiction; I would argue that his disappearance from the novel is an acknowledgment that all imaginative works—however conscious we or their creators may be of their contingent nature—must finally stand on their own.<sup>23</sup>

*Burning Water* succeeds because it is interesting and funny, and because its discussion of imagination, which owes much to Coleridge and the other Romantics, avoids easy answers. Bowering is aware of all the things which can interfere with imaginative perception—personal fears, received ideas, rationalism, our teachers' influence. It is hard enough to see clearly and make a life for ourselves, harder still to create for others as the historian and artist do. Failure is the norm, and

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<sup>19</sup> This is entirely Bowering's invention. Vancouver died in 1798 at Petersham, in Surrey, while writing an account of his travels. He was 41 years old. *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and round the World . . . in 1790-95 . . . under Captain George Vancouver* was completed by his brother John, assisted by Captain Puget, and published in three volumes in 1798.

<sup>20</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 216.

<sup>21</sup> "The Three-Sided Room: Notes on the Limitations of Modernist Realism," *The Mask in Place: Essays on Fiction in North America* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1982) 26.

<sup>22</sup> Smaro Kamboureli, "A Window Onto George Bowering's Fiction of Unrest," *The Canadian Novel Present Tense* ed. John Moss, 4 vols. (Toronto: NC, 1985) 4: 212; see also John Moss, "Himmler's Got the King: An Essay on *Badlands* and *Burning Water*," in *Present Tense* 249-64, and Anthony S. Brennan, "George Bowering's *Burning Water*," *Fiddlehead* 131 (1982): 85-87.

<sup>23</sup> This is obviously an inference on my part; if it seems unlikely that Bowering would disappear after criticizing modernist writers for doing so, we should keep in mind Kamboureli's contention (211) that all of Bowering's fiction reveals a tension between modernist and post-modern aesthetics.



success is always imperfect. But "the fascination of what's difficult"—to borrow another phrase from Yeats—ensures that lovers, explorers, and writers will continue to dream and create.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "The Fascination of What's Difficult," *Collected Poems* 104.