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Apollinaire and Vancouver: A Story about Our Poetry

By George Bowering

When I was a boy living in a semi-arid Podunk called Oliver, British Columbia. I used to imagine other places. Sometimes a young person would have help doing this. My boyhood came before television, thank God. With television you don't use your imagination. With radio you did, back in the day when radio had dramas instead of whatever it has now. With books, too, you did. The hundreds of westerns I read as a boy called for my imagination, even though the landscapes their authors described were pretty much what I saw in the cactussy South Okanagan Valley every day.

But when I would read a USAmerican novel about winning World War II in Europe or Asia, my mind was in a landscape or seascape I had never been surrounded by. I had to invent a little, maybe calling on photographs from *Life* magazine. When I got around to reading *Catcher in the Rye*, I found it a little hard to put myself in the place of the rich kid narrator who knew his way around New York City and had the money to ride in taxicabs. I had to rely on other stories set in New York, and photographs in *Life* magazine.

A year earlier I had read *1984*, and kind of enjoyed imagining a world seen from a sort of British point of view thirty-five long years in the future. (Those years looked a lot shorter from the other end, of course.) But then my grade eleven English teacher gave me hell for doing my book report on some science fiction in a pocket book.

"Actually," I said, "it's a Signet Book, otherwise called the New American Library." I was, by then, begun on my commitment to archive my reading life.

"You know what I mean," said my grade eleven English teacher.

This was the same person whose subject in composition class was always either the wrong ways to form an English sentence, or what was "understood" rather than said.

I decided that I would write poetry. It didn't matter where you were in poetry—unless you were Robert Frost or one of his guys. My first long poem was about headhunters in Malacca. Till today I have no idea whether there ever were such people—in the original sense. Luckily, I lent my only

copy of the poem to a friend's girlfriend, and as such things transpire, I never got it back. So much for the imagination, or as Percy Shelley would have had it, the fancy.

Anyway—when I was a book-reading boy in desert-like Oliver, B.C., I often heard of a municipality called Hope, B.C., perhaps because my uncle Jack and some other people were building the Hope-Princeton Highway. Geographically and historically, Hope is very important to British Columbia, so somehow in my juvenile imagination, or let's say fancy, Hope became a city, with at least modest skyscrapers and canyon-like city streets. Now picture the impact of realism when our highschool brass band went to New Westminster for that city's famous Easter celebration—and on the way there the train eased out of the Coquihalla Valley and stopped for a few minutes in Hope, B.C.

Okay, I thought, but there will be skyscrapers and so on in Vancouver and New Westminster. Around that time the population of Vancouver was about a quarter of what it is sixty-five years later, and people back then lived closer to the ground. It's true—for some reason people living in newish cities in Western Canada liked to brag about their few tallish buildings. In Vancouver the World Tower, an aggressively named Beaux-Arts edifice named for the mayor's newspaper that would occupy it for a short time, was built in 1911-12. It was seventeen storeys high, plus a three-storey dome. It was, Vancouverites would always tell you, "The Tallest Building in the British Empire." But in 1930 the Art Deco Marine Building would open, claiming for a while that boastful title seized from its rival a few city blocks to the east.

Of course, if you dropped these two buildings vertically into the river district of Chicago, they would pretty well disappear. But in addition to a handful of junior skyscrapers, the city on Canada's west coast had a couple of romances going—and Chicago, remember, was basically hog-butcher for the world, if you believed USAmerican poetry. If you believed French poetry, though, Vancouver had the romance of the fur trade and the romance of the transcontinental railroad. Both of these romances took place in darkness and snow.

The great Guglielmo Alberto Wladimiro Alessandro Apollinaire de Kostrowitzky, a Polish Italian who composed modernist French poetry under the name of Guillaume Apollinaire, wrote:

> *Étincelant diamant*
> Vancouver
> Où le train blanc de neige et de feux nocturnes fuit l'hiver . . .

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Apollinaire wrote quite a few poems with Canadian references, and he is usually called a Cubist or Surrealist poet—make of that what you will.

But the fifth line of t he poem in question, "Windows," says, when translated into English, "We will send it by telephone." The story goes that Apollinaire was sitting in a street café with some friends, when he suddenly remembered that he was supposed to be writing an introduction to a show by his painter friend Robert Delaunay. The show was called "*Les fenêtres*." Because the avant-gardist Delaunay just about made colour his subject—windows were not for seeing through to reality, but for presenting sensation themselves. Lots of critics think that the first line of the poem by Apollinaire and his drinking buddies was a reference to Delaunay's art: "*Du rouge au vert tout le jaune se meurt*". I think that like the fifth line, it tells us where the collaborators were, near a Paris traffic light, a device almost as modern as the telephone. (You will recall that Hugh Kenner, in denying that Yeats was a modernist, asked whether we can imagine a telephone in a Yeats poem.) That first line directs our poem's traffic: "From red to green all the amber dies." Well, the first traffic light appeared in Montmartre a year before the poem, but it was not red, green and amber. Either Apollinaire bent time to his wishes, or revisited the poem in the future.

Are we still talking about Vancouver and the poetic imagination? As I have said, Apollinaire sprinkled his poems with references to Canada. Our country returned the favour: in the Québec town of Sainte-Apollinaire, there is the factory of a company named Laflamme that sells the EcoNova window. Sounds to me like an early twentieth century art and literature movement.

All right. If you were going to write a critical piece about "*Les fenêtres*," you might note that, perhaps because it was collaborative, the poem scatters about for most of its length, then is brought together about the time that the single-word line "Vancouver" appears. That proceeds to an ending with a window that opens like an orange (or a painting) that is both fruit and colour, both of those the opposite to the winter that Vancouver train is fleeing.

If you have a look at Delaunay's windows you will see the simultaneity and colours that make the poem a nice exhibition note for the paintings. Delaunay's windows are *made* of colour, not to be seen through like any nineteenth century French painter's window on nature, but to be *seen*. It is in Delaunay that we can see as we have seen elsewhere, that modern paint-

ing showed modern writing the way. Something the Vancouver poets would learn half a century later.

Apollinaire's Swiss friend, Frédéric Louis Sauser, lost his right arm in World War I, and became the great left-handed French poet Blaise Cendrars. He would be an inveterate traveller and writer of poems composed or set in foreign parts. His friend Apollinaire received shrapnel wounds to the head during that same war and died from the great flu epidemic two days before the Armistice, hence never travelling to the Vancouver of his poem.

It is not likely that Cendrars travelled to the Vancouver of *his* poem, either. The poet who claimed to have been born in Paris lived a fictive life. Though coming from a bourgeois Swiss family, he would present himself as an ultra-whitmanic roustabout with a cheap suitcase checking out scalping knives in a "squaw's wigwam," or "looking for a cheap hotel" in Vancouver's dark side.

Cendrars would go to Hollywood twenty-five years after writing "Far West," a longish fauvist poem. There he wrote articles on Tinseltown and sent them to the newspaper *Paris-Soir*. His writing about the city he did see and his writing about exotic places he never got to are quite similar. A lot of it is made up, as was the personage he presented in place of himself. Having lost his right arm, he would indulge a taste for the darkly romantic, say the sinister. Even his Vancouver of 1912, though, begins with the gothic's favourite weather—fog:

> You can hardly hear the bell of ten p.m. through
> the thick fog that blankets piers and boats,

and we are tipped off that what follows will be mysterious and hostile to human sense. The wind will be glacial and the shadows murky. Steamships are gone to mysterious Asia and to a "Klondike" that the poet must have thought was on some Pacific coast. When the first person arrives he resembles a noir private eye:

> In the gloom I strain to make out street signs while I haul
> my valise, looking for a cheap hotel.

Early in the twentieth century in Europe the artists and poets looked for history's alternative within the human psyche, deranging the senses and swimming through dreams. In places such as Vancouver, as far from Europe as they could get or fancy getting, they saw that history was being held away by a dark scary exotic. People on the northwest coast didn't live

in history as they did even in Quebec City, but in myth. The surrealists, especially Andre Breton, collected aboriginal art from the coast around and north of Vancouver, feeling a companionship and a source provided by imagination that never had to free itself from Aristotle and the French Academy.

Not long after the middle of the century, a San Francisco poet with a taste for surrealism and baseball would write a serial poem called *Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival*. Jack Spicer wrote this "Magazine Verse" in the spring of 1965, a last composition before his death a few months later. He was planning on a move to Vancouver, where several of his San Francisco associates had already relocated, but he knew that he might be heading for a different location. Robin Blaser wrote that Vancouver had given Spicer "a brief sense of beginning again" (not a bad description of the experience of making a poem), but he went down to the Bay Area for the 1965 poetry jamboree, and died there before the summer was gone.

So his last poem would not work its way through everyday life and its objects, say on a Vancouver pier, but head for the surrounding hills:

> Start with a baseball diamond high
> In the Runcible Mountain wilderness.

And if I were a poet instead of a reader here, I would be permitted to say that Spicer's diamond high above the city

> Étincelant diamant
> Vancouver

These poets are not playing around—they are dying. Jack Spicer's subjects were baseball and poetry, and neither was a diversion, neither was just entertainment. Diamonds are not temporary.

People who live in myth do not understand the use of entertainment. Put it another way: Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Spicer were not describing or recording Vancouver—they were spinning it. And Runcible Mountain? You likely know that "runcible" is a nonsense adjective invented by Edward Lear. The Owl and the Pussycat, remember, shared a "runcible spoon." You may be less likely to know that Jack Spicer was a friend of the science fiction author Philip K. Dick, and that their works shared ideas and themes, that Dick's fictions were frequented by a character named Leo Runcible.

So you see, Vancouver has not all that often been a setting for poetic realists. To be fair, I will say that while Malcolm Lowry was squatting in and near the city he toiled on prose about hallucinatory Mexico, but he also wrote doggedly iambic sonnets about skid road Vancouver. French poets might find diamonds among the rough, but twentieth-century Brits (and would-be Brits) tended to curl a lip and notice dirty feet. In a typical poem titled "Christ Walks in this Infernal District Too," Lowry is not looking for any snow-covered locomotive, but rather for drug addicts stumbling into despicable beer parlours. Do you want to know the relationship between nature and the human? Windows don't open like oranges for Lowry, but "chancres blossom like the rose,"

> For on each face is such a hard despair
> That nothing like a grief could enter there.
> And on this scene from all excuse exempt
> The mountains gaze in absolute contempt.

There's another Englishman, we said, making the internal external.

The realists thought or said that they were recording a world—or a city—instead of spinning one. But you will recall that Lowry's unfortunate consul was told, as a jailed Lowry was told in Oaxaca, "you say you a wrider but we read all your wridings and dey don't make sense. You no wrider, you an espider and we shoota de espiders in mejico." We know that Lowry's protagonist had a head that was spinning much of the time, but when it came to poetry it was time for sober reflection.

Lowry spent the time of World War II in Vancouver and the north shore, unwillingly for the most part, if you believe his letters. He did not romanticize the aboriginal world, but rather displayed the normal British racism in his remarks about non-Europeans. He really wanted to get back to California, but the U.S. would not let him back in. He said that he would enlist in England if England would pay his travel expenses. He saw Canadians enlisting in droves, and while he did refer to Vancouver as "an outpost of Empire" when he wasn't calling it "The Slough of Despond," he did not seem to entertain the idea of wearing a Canadian uniform, no matter how much it resembled the British one. Nor did he look for a non-combatant's job. He had come from a non-working background, and for people such as he, the word "income" meant what the family settled on one. In a famous fall 1939 letter to Conrad Aiken, its pages filled with self-pity, he says that he and his girlfriend Marjorie stay in bed beneath one thin cover because it is "the only place in Vancouver where we have found either pleasure or

protection." Vancouver he called "the most hopeless of all cities of the lost," where the dramatic mock-tragic couple huddles in bed "like gaboons in the jungle to keep warm, no blankets or one, and pinchbeck overcoats: we freeze: the icy rain which hasn't stopped for days doesn't even bring melancholy any longer: the room is damp, muscles contract with rheumatiz, noses run, we cough like sheep, I fear Margie may become really ill. We haven't had enough to eat, one plate of beans a day," etc. This in a city where quite a few people wear shorts in November. And things weren't all that much better in Warsaw that Fall.

Well, if you read Lowry's most inventive novel *October Ferry to Gabriola*, you will encounter a couple that runs into very bad weather everywhere they go in Canada. Lowry and his fictional protagonists are lightning rods of the pathetic fallacy.

Remember the small-town boy George Bowering, who never got to see novels and stories and poems that took place in his locale? He grew up and moved to Vancouver, and started writing novels and stories and poems about his boyhood south Okanagan and his adulthood Vancouver. He looked for literature about this new place. He read John Dos Passos's *The 42nd Parallel*, in which some itinerant guys take the train from Manitoba to the west coast. He noted that Thomas Wolfe got sick on a ferry from the Island to Vancouver and died of meningitis right after getting back to Baltimore. Bowering's beloved Aunt Dorothy died of the same disease that same month.

He read Earle Birney, who was a pretty good friend Of Malcolm Lowry's widow. Birney published two novels, but one was set in England and the other in Utah. He did write poems and radio stuff about Vancouver and its environs, stuff mainly geological and historical and what we would later call ecological.

Late in his life the kid would read the literary record left by Pauline Johnson, Emily Carr and Irene Baird, appreciating *their* mythological understanding of the place.

Ah, place! How often I hear or read a poet say that he or she is driven by a sense of *place*. You know that I was that kid who wanted to experience the thrill of reading poetry and fiction (and opera in the case of Barbara Pentland) made by and about the place that literally made me. So I would rush to read the work of the writer who mentioned his or her attention to place. I would wind up reading something like a poem titled "Vancouver," that wears these lines:

sailboats dotting the bay,
picknickers at crowded beaches
competing for summer heat
and precious square centimetres of sand.

The writer was a political scientist rather than a poet, but he did publish that poem among others of similar cast.

To see what I am complaining about, you have only to do something like this:

Hondas jamming the pay lot,
shoppers in crowded boutiques
fighting over winter jackets
and precious made in China frocks.

I'm pretty sure that you could all play this game. But that is not enough to make art. Shelley did not describe Mont Blanc. Coleridge did not list the dangers of a sea voyage. H.D. did not look around for some recommended metaphors to tell us what London was like during the blitz.

Sure, sometimes I like to take a rest and read poems by the find-your-own-voice, write-what-you-know crowd. These people, if they are liked by the reviewers, are said to be masters, in control of their art. In another profession they might be in control of the acreage they are getting down in words, turning a forest into Forest Heights Estates, for example. Instead of committing "development," they settle for describing nature and other environments. In order to do this, they often like to make similies. If someone wants to know what a place is *like*, it's because he wants to be able to settle it among his previous experiences. Write what you know, indeed. Know what you write. Don't be a stranger.

"The power is there," said Shelley. "Nah, it's right here," said the developer poet. You might tell me that you have found similies in "Mont Blanc." Listen again, I say. "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?"

At times during my life I have heard people who are supposed to know more than I do extolling someone's efforts to "conquer nature." That phrase has always made me flinch. I learned to associate it with finding your own voice and writing what you know and being in control of your material. Milton Acorn, a sometime Vancouver poet who was a lot better than his admirers, often sold himself short because he liked a fight, and once said in a good interview, "A poet should write about what he or she knows." Take that, Apollinaire and Cendrars. Take that, Shelley.

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Now, the funny thing about Shelley was that while he saw secrets and mysteries as the animators of his subject, he read everything that scholars and scientists wrote, and all the encyclopaedia he could obtain. He knew the scientific theories about atoms and volcanoes, and leaned on them in ordering his revolutionary poems. If some Oxford professors suggested writing about what he knew, Shelley had already left the building.

Now, I will turn to a poet who never had anything good to say about Percy Shelley, but who had flirted a little with Keats. In one lecture, Charles Olson would say that the scholar poet should study his subject—whales, Idaho, trilobites—until he knows more about it than anyone else in the room; in another lecture he would stand with Keats, who championed negative capability, being inside doubts, mystery, etc. Shelley said that that's what, rarely as it occurred, was the "spirit of delight." That's when a lot of poets say "get me out of here." But place, if it is to be anything but backdrop, is not something to be entered and exited, not something to dot with sailboats or describe with comparisons. It has a way, does place, of getting inside your soul.

Now I am going to try to say something I've been trying to settle into for as long as I can remember. Since first reading it, I have loved William Carlos Williams's long, long poem *Paterson*, named after a city I have never visited. It is a poem utterly unlike, say, Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," or William Wordsworth's "London 1802," and not just because it is long. Williams proposes in his author's note "that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody." This he published in the first edition of the first book of the poem. Things changed as the poem proceeded. But what we learned for sure is that Paterson would not be a setting against which poetic stuff would happen.

A critic named Walter Scott Peterson tried to make it simple for us WCW acolytes: "the city's relation to its landscape is emblematic of man's relation to his world, and it is primarily the latter which *Paterson* is 'about'." I will leave it to you to see whether Williams's omnitrope sinks into your own human sense of things. For sure, though, no reader is going to be able to follow this as just another Google Earth poem.

[Spoiler alert.] I was one young poet in a group of young poets who had Williams as a grandfather. Our father was a guy named Charles Olson, a poet not well known to the English departments in, say, 1960. We read and quoted his essays and poems all hours of the day and night, especially the essay "Projective Verse." Eventually some patriotic poets back east would accuse us of slavishly following some U.S. poetry bosses, but Olson's

strongest advice was that we should attend to the circumstances we found ourselves in. Pretty soon the little poetry newsletter we produced each month would have maps of greater Vancouver on the covers, and we would be repeating one of Olson's favourite words—*locus*. The word is Greek for place, of course, but we knew enough to nose around among its usages.

In all of them, in history, genetics, mathematics, biology, locus is not just another name for place. It is a site where something important is happening. When the human universe (a term from Shelley that Olson didn't seem to mind using) is considered, that place is where your being—or mine—is a verb. In his Einsteinish *The Special View of History*, Olson makes the case for defining history from the inside out. Communist thinkers among others talk about history as a force that picks us up and moves us. Olson's history is a word for what we all do, we humans being: "man is no trope of himself as a synecdoche of his species, but is, as actual determinant, each one of us, a conceivable creator." An actor, not an acted upon.

And as in time, so in space. We are not figures in a landscape. The landscape does not exist without us. In the Lowry poem I quoted, the human beings are acted upon, and they are looked on by nature as a "scene." When Shelley, on the other hand, told us of the secret caverns at the apex of Mont Blanc, that the power was "there," he did so in a poem that begins with the Humean view that "The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind."

And how does the human, while he is being, perceive his place in the world and time? Here we come to another word we tyros snatched from Olson—proprioception. Stripping the printed version of Olson's lecture on the subject of upper case letters, we get "sensibility within the organism by movement of its own tissues." A little later, down the page and over in the margin, "the soul is / proprioceptive."

All right. The poet and Vancouver. You will often come across phrases such as "the life of the poet," or "the poet's life." You will find such life, if the poet is any good, in his poems. In his body his tissues are moving, and his body perceives that motion, and in his action he *is* history, he *is* locus, he *is* temporary, and if he is a careful listener, we can feel his experience in all our own senses.

I would like to tell you about a few of my favourite poems written by Vancouverites who read Olson when they were young. I think that the sharpest portrayal of the relationship between proprioception and locus comes in Daphne Marlatt's oft-published booklength poem *Steveston*. The settlement at the mouth of the Fraser River was important to the Japanese and Canadian salmon-fishing worlds. In the poem we are shown women,

usually, who have to work on a floor that moves as the river's flow and the ocean's tide move; see the woman cooking cabbage rolls, who "walks, from counter to stove, with a roll." That's not a pun; that's a rime, one of many that imitate, too, the watery world. The poet abides in the world of her poem, I venture to say, in like manner, poetic feet at the ends of sea legs.

Sorry.

Marlatt's first long poem of note was *Vancouver Poems*, one volume in a set of four booklength poems written by *Tish* poets and published by Coach House Press in 1972. It would, in ways too numerous to detail, differ from Earle Birney's famous longish poem about moving feet and mind through our city's centre.

"November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" (1961) is a poem of its time, or perhaps of its author's time. Birney was Canada's most prominent poet in the period covering Depression and Cold War, and he was also a teacher of old and middle English verse, so it is not surprising to hear satire and Chaucerian scansion in his walking poem. He does not so much take his scene in, nor give over to its demands, as he characterizes it with orderly rhythm and alliteration and bravura metaphor:

> The tree-barbed tip of Point Grey's lance
> has failed again to impale the gone sun
> Clouds and islands float together
> out from the darkening bandsaw of suburbs
> and burn like sodium over the distant waters

Oddly, we remember that Birney had years earlier written a radio play titled *Trial of a City*, because throughout this walking poem we are aware that the city is being judged, that the poem is a kind of trail of evidence, and that it hints at a punishment in the form of nuclear Armageddon, a theme that appears elsewhere in Birney's work:

> a young girl sits on a granite bench
> so still as if already only
> silhouette burned in the stone

It is November, after all. The end portends.

Once in a while the judge becomes not quite the archaeologist that Olson likes to see in his own work, but at least an observer:

and I on the path at the high-tide edge
wandering under the leafless maples
between the lost salt home
and the asphalt lodge where carhorns call
call in the clotting air by a shore
where shamans never again will sound

[are you hearing all this lovely rime?]

with moon-snail conch the ritual plea
to brother salmon or vanished seal
and none ever heard
the horn of Triton or merman

[Oops, classical allusions scare the aboriginal inhabitants away.]

In reading the poem you are aware mostly of the rhythm, but images come through and stick. Sometimes, though, you wonder about an old boat resting on "an Ararat of broken clamshells." It's clever, but it isn't Vancouver. Still, this is a memorable poem, and we snobs in time forgive it.

Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* was written a decade later, and while it is in most ways very much different from Birney's *flânerie*, it shares a devotion to highly noticeable sound, and when the expanded version of Marlatt's poem was published in 2013, it was retitled *Liquidities*, a word used in Birney's poem.

I am pretty sure that I am not the only contemporary who wondered about that plural in the original title. The work is clearly a sequence, perhaps a serial poem, and it even suggests a kind of *flânuese's* walk from beginning to end. Reading from the first to the last unnumbered page, you find yourself going from residential neighbourhood down to the waterfront and from this present to an earlier time of pioneer loggers, then to aboriginal coast, and finally to this mysterious and near perfect ending:

under
carboniferous imprint of old fern, echinoidea, solaster,
we step back in space before the drift & diamond light
fail—to see you, call

Worm, small worm host of light.
Borrow a shell.

[Yes, you saw or heard the diamond is back. But did you see "no idea" in echinoidea?]

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Birney and Marlatt, beings moving in their ways through the city. Oregon poet Philip Whalen said that a poem is a graph of a mind moving. A Daphne Marlatt poem is noticeably a graph (or trail) of a human's senses in motion, proprioception, I guess, in place. I would like to borrow my daughter Thea's way of watching a Marlatt poem: "a radical poetic such as Baudelaire's begins with the writer in the present, lost in language, writing without intent, and yet in a state of extreme concentration." You'll have no problem in seeing the difference between Birney's walk and Marlatt's.

You will see in the first page of Marlatt's poem that you have to let yourself be lost in (not thought but) language, intently concentrating the while. Take the third word of the poem, "wavers." The line is "Wet fur wavers". That word could be a verb, or it could be a noun. And that choice bifurcates the whole book to come, and there are more bifurcations to come.

Now alerted, the attentive reader will hear/see the word "Asphalt" and expect "as fault" to cut "thru time," as the repeated "salt" does. You will need light feet to show you the ways through this lovely poem. (Oh, and Birney uses "asphalt" in his poem, but not this way.)

You want to know how proprioception will get you through or around? Imagine a young blind poet with the ambition to find his own syllabic way as a walker of a city, say Vancouver. This is Ryan Knighton. He was born in the very early seventies, diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa as a teen, wrote poems while his eyesight disappeared, made witticisms about Milton, wrote two successful autobiographical books, and turned his attention to writing for motion pictures. Not many blind people do that.

In 2001 he published his first full book of poetry, a third of which is the sequence "From Charles Street, Pandemonium." You get the Milton reference, right? In fact, the young poet has the nerve to introduce the epic poet right off the bat: "In Milton's plot, his paradise / inside a darkness / is unearthed by God." The old blind poet will be the young poet's companion, usually called "John," in some wandering in the young poet's home environment in the east end and elsewhere in Vancouver.

Thus we see the young poet's prepared structure, and recognize that his work will resemble Birney's in some ways, while edging toward the discovered form of Marlatt's. The world of psychology gives us the term "ego dissolution" to name what happens in Marlatt's poem, where the boundary between self and surround loses definition. "I is the other," averred Baudelaire's successor Arthur Rimbaud. Everyone knows this. On seeing man's first home, Milton's Satan complains, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell." It's all in your mind, said Shelley's hero David Hume.

In Pandemonium, totally deprived of Heaven's light, how did demons and author see? Why, with "darkness visible." Ryan Knighton's poem is chased with images created by Robert Sherrin, photographs obviously of things, but unfocused. The poem evokes memories of Vancouver *seen*, but of neighbourhoods disappearing from sight, haunted by Miltonic paradoxes. Knighton *may* just be writing of Milton when he says:

> The vision is that
> purifying, that searing
> it blackened his eyes

but then:

> It is not a hard world
> to justify, to be touched into
> by blindness. I imagine the words

and the sentence goes on, but the notation stops it nicely there for a tap of a cane's time.

So the poem is the walk of a poet going blind in the heart of his city. In offering an ordinary guy by calling his epic companion simply John, the young new poet faces us with a necessary trust. Someone says casually near the end of the poem, "It is not / a great poem," and we say this is no city for masterpieces. Maybe ego dissolution has been entering with the darkness. Knighton says goodbye to his Virgil-like walking friend John, and says in a Vancouverite's demotic

> us would-be *flanneurs* wait for
> oblivion in its pleasing shape
> of love, our common
>
> emergency.

This is said in the final section of the poem, thirteen little stanzas that treat of the speaker's understanding of his task, to render the unseen seen:

> But how
> do you go on
> to make this place
>
> out of this place?

. . . .

                    What I saw
& couldn't was that grace-
ful body

. . . .

as beauty seems

sometimes best
seems served
blindly.

Ryan Knighton was one of the Tads in a poets' group called Dads and Tads in the nineties. These people took turns editing the group's poetry magazine *Tads*. One of the Dads was George Stanley, now the oldest important poet in the city of Vancouver. Stanley's most pervasive theme has been the effort to understand one's place, one's *use* in the physical community one inhabits—first San Francisco, then Vancouver, then Terrace, finally Vancouver again. Over the years, he has written poems that detail Vancouver stuff, workmen in warehouse, beer parlours, rain on eyeglasses. In the twenty-first century he has been writing a major work called *Vancouver: a Poem.*

For a moment let us posit that the voice in the poem is the author's voice. If "Birney" and "Marlatt" and "Knighton" are walkers of the city, "George Stanley" is a bus rider. Usually we read about actual things and events in or outside the buses, which latter are identified. But you remember that the city of Vancouver has never been able to shake off the French poets. So one day George Stanley sees or imagines one on the 99 B-Line bus:

The reek of wet clothing, the growl of the diesel
over the fast pulse of its idle
(like the muffled roar of a captive giant),
then suddenly, all around, crows cawing.

What is all this to Verlaine, who sits quietly
in a side seat, the unread *Province* in his lap,
transported by vision? — a white form,
a sweet, insistent voice addressing him,

while he, in response, murmurs the syllables
of a Name whose cadence quells the bus's rumble.

When I first read the first volume of the poem, I thought that I was reading an attractive 124-page recording of the ordinary life, a championing of diurnal poetry. The volume ends with an image of pensioners kicking their way through autumn leaves, and these little words:

The mind is this street
only the interiors
around it
arranged
differently [.]

How much further, I thought, could one be from Shelley's mountain?

But Stanley's poem begins with "his" reading William Carlos Williams on the 210 bus; we catch the poet at the moment, figuring out how to write a city's poem, telling us that it would be a good idea to read *Paterson* as a lead-in. I love this. It is not literary allusion as in Birney, nor is it messing around with literary allusion as in Knighton.

It is a big rime, with the reminder that rime focuses, has to focus, on *difference*. Vancouver rimes with Paterson. If we reread *Paterson* we will see what Stanley is doing in *Vancouver*. We will see two differing cities, poems, illuminated in the shadows of one another.

Williams and Stanley took on these cities/poems later in lives of writing and thinking. In either of them we find the poet's mind coming to a realization, then another realization. Not pedestrian thought, either; on a bus, if one is lucky, one sits. And thinks, perhaps tempted by Hume: "the city itself—the mere fact of it—being—thousands of tons of steel & concrete, glass. It's just an image in the eye—it doesn't exist—" but—

It's fun to follow the bus rider's thoughts, and materialize all at once with him when he suddenly knows

          the city
is not unknowable
it's real [.]

Vancouver: a Poem is packed with images of the everyday, and it is also the most philosophical of any poem written about that city so far. It is not finished. It shows no sign that it ever will be.

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If you wanted to write an essay about the way Vancouver poetry could transport rather than derange the senses, you might want to compare Apollinaire's snow-covered railroad train with Stanley's No. 99 Broadway bus, ride both poems to the end of the line.