

Articulating New

Neil K. Besner

I

Past a certain point, to know someone both personally and professionally can be offensive, a constant and instantaneous transgression: Bill and W.H. New. In memory as at present, Bill is sitting in his office, fourth floor Buchanan Tower, with the door open (there used to be a map of Africa on it), in bright light and amidst sheaves of paper in many configurations of finely managed disarray—manuscripts, half-used pads of paper, stacks of notes, letters. (There, too, sits the domed kettle, the jar of instant coffee, and their bitter issue, brewed impossibly strong—accusatory flecks of powder pocking the surface—with false salvation in the old Styrofoam cup where cubes of sugar dully glisten. Graduate students emerge with crazy eyes, only partly besotted with a mightily tendentious thesis.)

A bald eagle can fly by the window, eye level, and it does. Outside, a drizzled and misted smell of woodchips; the evergreens; and, looking north across the bay, a lowering rumour of mountain-tops (I used to think of Birney sitting there on a brutish forehead.)

Here sits one incarnation, Bill actual and prospective: laughing over the phone, or, more recently, unknowingly, shamelessly naming himself on screen—“New Message. . . .” This cordial Bill, long known for signing his letters “Cheers,” sits, arms folded high over his chest, at one of the two desks he rearranges every five years, while around him the legion shelves eddy and flow with books in perpetually shifting dissonant rows. In their midst, among worlds, Bill.

Or, Bill in the classroom. In the late seventies, early eighties, arriving with the kettle, with be vies of books, newspapers, magazines—to the seminar on

New Zealand fiction he brought copies of *The Listener*, have I remembered right, Bill?—and a map, bibliographies. *Dreams of Speech and Violence* was in the making. In the first class Bill gave us the magazines, told us to read around in them, gain some small sense of a culture. Remembered that he'd forgotten to include his own book in the bibliography. Asked us to draw an impromptu map of Canada. Sat, an alert sphinx, listening to us—Williams, Ingham, Besner, the usual suspects—opine on P. Grace, V. O'Sullivan, M. Duggan, S. Ashton Warner, B. Pearson, on Mansfield, Frame, Mincher; solicitously mispronounce *Mutuwhenua*. Brought, to the last class, another wheelbarrow of books from his office to give to us, Canadian books among them (I have from that occasion the beautiful Press Porcépic edition, 1973, of Godfrey's *Death Goes Better with Coca-Cola*; from others, in his office, anthologies—"have a look through these, tell me what you think"—Daymond and Monkman, Vols. 1 and 2, Colombo's *Other Canadas*, many more).

Or, Bill at the old West Mall office of *Canadian Literature*, a mug of tea to hand, editing. Next door I'm making a mess of the subscriptions. Journals are sliding everywhere down the table. A cup of coffee is spilled. I turn around to see, at the door, the quizzical bright eyes and an eyebrow, up. Silence. Or, Bill at the Faculty Club. There is a bunch of sessionals at a table, where we're arguing across our trays about the Lowry documentary, *Volcano*; he quietly joins us ("May I?"). We become more vociferous. What is striking about most of the memories—including memories of last week—is that compared to everyone around him, Bill does not say much. But I can hear, vividly, the tone, the quiet desire to be casual. This is difficult, because everything to do with books, writers, reading, and writing matters, all the time.

Bookends: summer 1980, and Bill is standing with me outside his house, I'm biking home, I've come to say goodbye (I'm going to teach in the Okanagan for at least a year), he says, "I want a thesis out of you," and we both laugh. Bill at home, a December morning, 1982, handing me the final draft of my thesis (I'd been back at UBC for fifteen months and I'm going to Calgary to work at Mount Royal). There is a cat musing around our feet. Bill laughs and says, "Get yourself a snowsuit." February 1998: we're out to dinner in Kits and find we disagree over the film of *The Wings of the Dove*. I live through, all over again, that familiar, arithmetically ineluctable experience wherein I say exponentially more, Bill elliptically less; he persuades me that he might be right; and I get the last word.

II

Meanwhile, the anxiety of influence: W.H. New in print, the initials down too many spines. There are more News than can be told. Best intentions notwithstanding, the documentary evidence of his protean presence among us these last thirty years and more cannot be cited, much less narrated, without appearing parodic at worst, ironic at best. In some of his professional lives, he continues to follow his encyclopedic vocation as an editor, critic, and bibliographer: editor of *Canadian Literature*, Number 74, Autumn 1977, to Number 145, Summer 1995, and author of fifty-five editorials for the journal. In the last issue, two W.H.N. opening pieces: his moving tribute to George Woodcock (1912-1995), and "Looking Back to 1994", an archetypal New piece, reflecting on approximately seventy-three books published in 1994—fiction, drama, poetry, anthologies, biography, criticism, reprints, art and architecture books. As always, the judgements are specific and explicit. Some 100 other editorials and articles and well over 100 reviews in scholarly journals around the world. The many books he has written to date range from monographs (*Malcolm Lowry*, 1971) to broader studies (*A History of Canadian Literature*, 1989), to books of poetry (*Science Lessons*, 1996) to critical works (*Land Sliding*, 1997). He has edited twenty-seven books and contributed chapters to at least twenty-seven others. As I write I know of at least three works in progress and another in press. At sixty some of us are burned out; W.H.N. appears to be in mid-career.

As teacher, editor, and critic, there is no one in Canada who has opened out so many ways to think about so many kinds of writing. There is no one with a view at once so comprehensive and so grounded in the particular. There is no one who has done more, first, to contribute to the definition of the discipline, then, to interrogate and redefine his involvement with the discipline. And it might well be that as a teacher, he has had as much or more influence. W.H. New does not talk about the Order of Canada or about the teaching prizes he has won, most recently at UBC from the Faculty of Graduate Studies (1996).

III

How, then, could a collection of essays in honour of Bill, all contributed by his former students (except for one which was written by a student currently completing his doctorate), truly reflect the range of his work? Is it disingenuous to suggest, by being as different in subject, scope, approach, theoretical frame, as possible? Bill began his career when approaches to

Canadian literature and postcolonial criticism were all too often understood as separate precincts, although not by Bill. Stephen Slemon's "Climbing Mount Everest" speaks directly, and now, in the late nineties, necessarily differently, to Bill's longstanding explorations of Empire's ascents and declines. Where better to chart the rifts in such culturally contested territory than at a site so alluringly depicted and imagined at several borderlines—geographical, topographical, disciplinary—converging at the alleged top of the world? And what more fittingly fragmented subject, both as text and context, for such an inquiry than the alloyed demands of mass, popular, and high culture that drive both contemporary and historical visions and versions of Everest and our access to its significance?

Penny Van Toorn opens her essay on discursive regimes and indigenous Canadian and Australian historiography with the assertion that "'indigenous history' was for many years a contradiction in terms, because Westerners defined 'history' precisely in terms of what Indigenous cultures lacked." With its foregrounding of the problems of record, writing, text, and history as these would silence or control indigenous voice, the contradictions afoot in Van Toorn's formulation continue to inhabit and inhibit territory of particular interest for Bill. Van Toorn's account of the contemporary struggle for control over four venues for Indigenous historiographic production proceeds from her theoretical introduction into four "case studies" (a poem by Ron Hamilton, "Our Story Not History," Daisy Sweid-Smith's essay, "In Time Immemorial," the autobiography *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story*, and Thomas King's children's book, *A Coyote Columbus Story*). Van Toorn's careful inquiry into the meanings of history and its discourses resonate across much New criticism.

With its close attention to the implications of structure—to the meanings of the shapes that fictions make and unmake—Tamas Dobozy's essay on Mavis Gallant plays across another of Bill's longstanding interests: his studies of the work of individual writers that consider form as it reveals meanings (think of his work on Janet Frame, Laurence, Kroetsch, Richler, among many others). Dobozy's conception of "designed anarchy" moves across the shape of many Gallant stories to show how disruptions of order and disassemblies of convention work to reveal havoc and conflict as supervening semblances of cool irony undo themselves.

Carole Gerson's "The Most Canadian of All Canadian Poets" shows clearly how one powerful version of Canadian national and literary identity—high modernism in the ascendant—shaped fifty years of response to Pauline John-

son's poetry, and moves from this particular instance both to a wider consideration of "the erasure of early women poets from Canada's literary history," and to a different reading of Johnson's poem "The Corn Husker." The conflicted forces shaping Canadian literary history—both within and beyond national contexts—have engaged Bill for at least three decades; Gerson's rereading of Johnson, I expect, will constitute another welcome intervention.

As noted above, Bill's first book was *Malcolm Lowry* (1971), and for a long time it intrigued me that he should have such an abiding interest in a writer so apparently foreign in so many ways to his own temperament and taste. It now seems entirely fitting. Alongside Bill's encyclopedic editorial and bibliographical inclinations runs the most thoroughgoing catholicity I have ever known, and Lowry, inspired, demonic, and damned (talking about Day's biography when it came out, Bill remarked to me that Lowry was "a labyrinth") continues to fascinate him at several levels. Therefore I expect that David Ingham's many-layered reading of "The Forest Path to the Spring" in the light of Lowry's neo-Platonism might bring Bill back to another home ground he has never really left for very long.

A precise consideration of text—by which I do not mean simply close reading—has always been one important point of departure and return for Bill in his work on voice (think of "Every Now and Then" on *The Stone Angel*, among others), and I understand Claire Wilkshire's loving attention to voice in Glover's story "Red" both to develop this line of inquiry and to show, again (if some of us have forgotten), the riches that such a reading can yield.

IV

Dear Bill,

All right, so I've got it all wrong. And I've said nothing explicit about your sense of humour. (But thank you for all these years of laughing at my jokes.) I've said nothing about your extraliterary avocations, your garden, your painting. I haven't mentioned that I have, at certain moments, been gravely concerned at the state of your office. I will, however, admit in print that your skills in reading irony are too good for me.

All right, so you know that I mean more than I can say.

V

Bill—on behalf of all of your students, friends, colleagues around the world: thank you.