

# Shaping an Image of Europe - Half Way Over Iceland (George Bowering's "Discoloured Metal")

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One of the main objectives of shape prose is to show weaknesses and limitations of written language or to emphasize the descriptive power of visual language. Text is physically transformed into illustration(s) to re-introduce the authority of the visual. This provides authors with endless possibilities of expressing the third entity of meaning, and this expands the freedom of interpretation on the part of readers of multimodal texts. The third entity of meaning is a term which I coined in the course of my doctoral research to refer to the new and semantically largely independent meaning derived from the interpretation of the verbal and the visual meanings in a shaped (or in some other way multimodal) texts, in other words, the meaning which is created through the semantical interrelations of the verbal and visual. How is the reading of the text influenced by its multimodal shape? Hallet writes: [visual forms of gesture; a.r.] direct the reader from written discourse to visual elements in the margins of the page and urge them to interrelate the different semiotic elements, thus breaking up the linear continuity of the verbal text and transforming the act of reading into a hypertextual activity (Hallet 2014, 157). Indeed, reading a multimodal shaped text always is an interdisciplinary task which requires from readers a certain sensitivity for both the verbal and the visual, and the meaning that arises from their interaction.

Shaped prose is sometimes referred to as shaped-prose, pattern prose or visual prose, analogous to classification of poetry that features similar visual elements of layout. All these terms describe short prose which can be defined as *short stories*, and which feature the following types of graphic devices of artistically altered graphic layout (the typology is taken over from my Dissertation defended at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz, Austria, May 2018. Tutek, Nikola (2018) Visual and Verbal Interrelations in Canadian Short Fiction, Dissertation, pg. 299.):

1. Rendering literary message through the usage of fonts, punctuation (for example, Bowering's consistent disregard of apostrophe in contractions in *The Rain Barrel*), interpolation of paragraphs and other sections of text by numbering and lettering. This type of graphic devices is focused on typography and structure of integral texts.
2. Rendering a literary message through physical re-arrangement and negation of integral texts. This type of graphic devices partially focuses on spacing, that is, on the usage of negative spaces. Negation of texts is achieved with parts of texts which are crossed out but still fully legible (for example, in Bowering's "Staircase Descended"). Sentences and words which are arranged in this manner are never physically disintegrated, and no textual message is lost or hidden.
3. Rendering a literary message through physical layout which fractures the text. This device features 'gorging' negative or colored spaces which do not respect the border of a sentence, a word or even a character. Parts of texts covered by 'gorging' negative

or colored spaces cannot be retrieved (for example, the white circles covering the text in Bowering's "Discoloured Metal"), hence, some of the textual meanings are deliberately lost or hidden.

4. Graphic layout of the text, which is printed in a shape that alludes to a semantic feature of the text. This type of graphic devices can but do not have to cause a part of the textual message to be lost or hidden (such is, again, Bowering's "Discoloured Metal" where the gorging white circles hide parts of the text and also allude to an airplane window).

The difference between the third and the fourth types is in the fact that the third type hides parts of the meaning of the text by erasing them, and the erased, blank spaces inevitably take certain forms, while in the fourth type these blank forms are not random, they carry a reference to the meaning of the text (or its parts), and they actually reveal parts of the meaning of the text. The third and the fourth types of devices of artistically altered graphic layout will be the most important for the further analysis of Bowering's short text, namely, the analysis of the meaning of the circular blank and textual fields in the body of the text.

### **Bowering's short story "Discoloured Metal"**

George Bowering's short story "Discoloured Metal" from his 1994 collection of short prose *The Rain Barrel* is a seemingly simple account of a voyage by airplane over the polar route to Germany and back to Canada retold by an unreliable first person narrator. The interesting intervention into the graphic of the text starts on the second printed page of the text with a little blank circle placed in the middle of the page. The blank circle becomes bigger on each following page, eventually making the full understanding of the text impossible. The seventh and the eighth pages of the printed text are entirely blank. On the ninth page an interesting switch occurs; now we can see only the text within a small circle, and the rest of the page is blank. The circle with the text becomes bigger on each subsequent page providing an opposite effect: now with every new page we see more text and get more insight into the meaning of the story. The story ends on the fourteenth page which again features an intact text form.

Bowering's intervention into the graphic layout of text first provides growing whitened circular forms in the text, and then repeats in negative: the text is reintroduced in expanding circles, we might say black circles, of text. In that way, the text of the story takes on the appearance of a Gestalt image. White and black circles are juxtaposed in apparent weighing of their cognitive powers; the visual authority of whiteness erases parts of narration, and then the whole of it, while circular patches of broken text reinstall the rule of

meaning by restoring narration. (The description of George Bowering's "Discoloured Metal" is based on my Dissertation defended at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz, Austria, May 2018. Tutek, Nikola (2018) Visual and Verbal Interrelations in Canadian Short Fiction, Dissertation, pg. 317-320.)

Two important questions emerge. The first question deals with the semantics of the story: What happened in the blank part of the text? The second question deals with the multimodal interrelations between the semantics of the texts and its altered physical layout: Why white and black circles, what is their meaning, and how do they relate to the semantics of the narration? The answer to the first question is speculative; we can only suppose that the narrator started a conversation with someone, and that the conversation continued to some point where the voyage took a different course. In her analysis of "Discoloured Metal", Löschnigg writes the following: "This mysterious remark about 'the very bad thing in the middle' may refer to a plane accident, the memory of which the protagonist wants to obliterate" (Löschnigg 2014, 244). The second question is more important for my analysis. White circles are reminiscent of the two notions introduced at the beginning of the story: the airplane (windows) and the poles. Are white circles actually airplane windows which, at the departure, narrow our view, and expand it during the return, which is expressed by textual circles? In that case, an interesting visual and semantic opposition is constructed: during the trip to Europe, the story is within the airplane, while the window offers the outside, frozen world, while during the trip back to Canada the situation is the opposite, whiteness is in the airplane, and the story is outside, partially visible through the window. Or do the white circles represent the whiteness of the polar circles, and are textual circles representations of the planet Earth? The blank circles are also reminiscent of the whiteness of the snow. Under snow the landscape loses every feature except the shape, and that's exactly the effect produced reversibly by the blank and textual circles. Besides gaps in the narrator's memory, Löschnigg provides the following possible explanations of the meaning of white circles and their relations to the narration:

The expanding circles of emptiness and their subsequent filling up could also visualize the loss and gain of time which affects the traveller between different time zones. [...] On yet another level this gradual dis- and re-appearance of words could also be seen as a reflection of the precarious hyphenated situation of the German-Canadian passengers on board, or of the protagonist's feeling of alienation as the plane tears him away from his home country and his wife (Löschnigg 2014, 245).

There are other literary explanations to this graphical intervention and its interrelations with the semantics of the narration. The first is the semantic connection between the story title, more precisely, the word discoloured with the discoloured circular parts of the text.



acknowledges his unwillingness to tell the central part of his story, and this plays along perfectly with the usage and the function of white and black circles. Further in the text the narrator discloses: "Before this I have been in three North American Lands. I wager that I will refer to them, necessary memory, in whatever this enscribing is." (Bowering 1994, 94). What is this necessary memory? This notion might refer to the narrator's experience before the voyage, the experience of North America, but it inevitably refers to his experience after the voyage, the experience of Europe. It is necessary for the narrator to remember but it is not necessary to tell the whole story. While his references to North America are numerous, Europe remains a mystery. It is interesting that in this sentence, and other instances in the collection *The Rain Barrel*, Bowering uses a misspelled word enscribing (inscribing), detracting even more from the credibility of the narrator's discourse. Finally, Bowering writes the following sentence partially covered by the third white circle in the story:

"Flying t- -here is a Europe inside Europe. Inside memory and human meat."  
(Bowering 1994, 94).

The narrator is describing passengers on board, some of them of European descent. By yet another category of memory provided by the narrator, the memory of identity, he covers the intrinsic experience that determines people, and that people always take with them, no matter where they go. The narrator offers us the memory of his own identity that reveals him to be a person belonging to the North American cultural circle. On the other hand, he does not openly reveal how the European experience influenced his memory (or vision) of identity. This might be connected to the previously mentioned point that at the beginning of the voyage this memory seems to be concentrated within the airplane, while during the return, memory is pushed outside.

The narrator's prejudices connected to Europe (in opposition to the introductory quote) is provided right at the beginning of the story, and with a humorous effect: "Dont get me wrong, we did not snub Germany. But you know, an inexperienced yet southern-valleyed young fellow, well, Mediterranean swim suits, palm trees, wind blowing them inside out-". (Bowering 1994, 91). This sentence depicts the narrator as unprepared for the experience he is about to have, and maybe this is the reason for his refusal to reveal what happened in Europe.

We might suppose that the European part of the story is omitted because it is simply not important, and the focus of the narration is on the trip itself. That might be partially true, but the European part of the trip is not really omitted, it is there, but it is hidden. White spaces in "Discoloured Metal" are an illustrative example of presence expressed through absence, of meaning expressed through the absence of meaning. If Bowering really wanted

to hide the central part of the story, he would structure the story in that way, focusing on departure and arrival. Instead, he represents the central part of the story by its physical absence.

There is yet another interesting example of 'disappearing text' in "Discoloured Metal", which is positioned outside of the white circles. On page 96, just under the largest white circle (after which entirely white pages follow), there are these lines:

"So we have come

As trippers North

Although the continuation of the text is blank, unlike with the white circles, it can be reconstructed because of the intertextual reference that it provides. Löschnigg writes: "Almost certainly the 'educated' reader will try to fill the empty space with the remaining lines from W. H. Auden's and Luis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland*. However, this would again be only one of the many paths the text invites the reader to follow" (Löschnigg 2014, 247). MacNeice's poem "Iceland" (the fifth stanza) offers the following lines: "So we have come/As trippers North/Have minds no match/For this land's girth;/The glacier's licking/Tongues deride/Our pride of life./Our flashy songs." The stanza implies that the traveler is unable to fully grasp and understand the land whose whiteness hides all clues and mocks the travelers' bewilderment. This perfectly reflects Bowering's intentions in "Discoloured Metal"; the next two entirely white pages and the following pages where the text reappears in expanding textual circles provide little ground for accurate interpretation of the story. Bowering's usage of lines from an acclaimed poem might be seen as a clue to the reader (provided just before the complete disappearance of text), but the clue itself speaks of absence of clues in the great whiteness and that certainly implies irony.

### **"Discoloured Metal" and a Traveler's Vision of Iceland**

How does the literary usage of Iceland as a neutral territory, a place to refill (not just kerosene), function in Bowering's short story, furthermore, how does that reflect a Canadian perception of Iceland and Europe and, finally, the main character's perception of himself?

Let us go back to the three previously mentioned crucial points of consideration: 1. The Henry James quote, 2. Mentioning of Iceland in the text, and the position of the word Iceland in the physical layout of the text, and 3. Intertextual connection to W. H. Auden's

and Luis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland*.

The introductory quote by Henry James prepares the reader for a text sensitive to complex cultural issues of which a careful traveller is very well aware, and a text which is, hence, free from prejudice. However, the text is everything but free of prejudice, actually, it deliberately mocks the ideas expressed in the introductory quote. This is most obviously seen in Bowering's ironic mentioning and descriptions of Germany and German people. Although not directly introduced, the positioning of Iceland in the short story as well follows Bowering's ironic take on travelers' prejudice. Firstly, mentioning Iceland marks the middle of the narration, and it is physically placed in the middle of the text, hence confirming the usual notion of Iceland being in between, a land that divides and connects the two worlds. More importantly, it is after the first mentioning of Iceland that the white spaces, and then white circles, appear. In fact, most of the narration that happens over and in Iceland is lost in whiteness. Whiteness reconfirms the widespread prejudice of the unforgiving arctic climate which allows little action and even less memory. However, it is the whiteness in the shape of airplane windows that provides the main insight into the traveler's perception of Iceland. Bowering's irony regarding the human nature is reconfirmed; although the main character is an educated and married person, as a traveler he is too weak to avoid the usual prejudice (and supposedly a love affair) because his view is radically narrowed by the frames of white circles, the frames which expose his deepest limitations. This coincides with Bowering's idea of lost or hidden memory. If something negative, or even a love affair, really happened to the main character in Europe, it is a very common spot that this unwanted memory is eliminated exactly in whiteness over Iceland. In that respect, Bowering is masterly using some basic cultural notions (we can call that prejudice) about Iceland to achieve (self)irony, to portray the main character, and to structure his narration into two main parts (before and after Iceland).

Iceland is mentioned three times in the story. First mentioning is in complete sentence just before the appearance of the last white circle, and the sentence that marks the beginning of the medial part of the narration:

As we all together approached Iceland there was still a little thin light in the sky, no real darkness this far north, and then the sun came flying up in the northeast. (Bowering 1994, 96).

In the following line the main character seemingly starts a conversation with someone, and that conversation is partially or entirely hidden by the white circle from the next line on. The white circle possibly symbolizes the polar sun and its light which erases one part of traveller's memory. The second mentioning of Iceland can be found in the bottom of that



same white circle.

"Iceland portion of the earth's surface" Pliny M (Bowering 1994, 96).

Although a large portion of the text is missing, thanks to the readable name Pliny we can easily reconstruct the following quote by Pliny Miles from his 1854 work *Norðurfari, or, Rambles in Iceland*:

"But Iceland is not a myth, it is actual and real, a solid portion of the earth's surface" (Miles 1854, 15).

This quote reaffirms Iceland as one of the key elements for understanding the text. Although Iceland is only mentioned, and its appearance simply marks the middle of the trip, it seems that Iceland is one of the main characters in the story. Iceland actively hides something which is not a myth but something that really happened to the main character. What really happened, be it travelling difficulties or a love affair, we might never know.

It is interesting to mention that the quote from *Letters from Iceland* follows right under the same white circle, and the next two pages (Bowering 1994, 97-98) are completely blank, leading the reader to complete oblivion. Parts of words reappear on the page 99 in a small textual circle in which we can reconstruct words *cigars* and probably *yellow*, and [...] *erbia* which probably stands for Serbia, a country mentioned in other Bowering's stories. That means that after the blank the main character is already on his way home, and the secret of his trip was successfully concealed.

The last mentioning of Iceland can be found on top of the last and the largest textual circle (hence closing a symmetrical composition), and it reads:

[...]opped again to refuel at Keflavik, and [...]

[...]ere in the little survivalist coffee shop.

The rest of the visible text shows that the main character is eager to return home as if haunted by a certain bad memory. The two main notions of Iceland presented earlier in the text are reaffirmed in the first two lines. Firstly, Iceland as place in between where kerosene and hope can be refilled before reaching the destination on either side of the Atlantic. Secondly, the word survivalist again emphasizes the isolation and deceptive simplicity of the place, but also it tells a lot about the main character's existential anxiety.

In the end, the idea of survival in a very rough climate (or at least the idea how outsiders

perceive that climate) is directly connected to the quote from MacNeice's poem "Iceland" (the fifth stanza) from *Letters from Iceland*. It is interesting to note that quotes from *Letters from Iceland* are also featured in the 2006 Canadian drama *Away from Her*, written and directed by Sarah Polley, and based on Alice Munro's short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain". Clearly, this short travel book, and indirectly Iceland, are well represented in Canadian art and culture as something far, isolated, and detached, a place where survival is at least equally as important as it is in Canada. *Letters from Iceland* features a great deal of appreciation for Iceland but also a lot of parodic, humorous comments on the place and its people, and that coincides perfectly with Bowering's perception of human nature.

### **Conclusion: Iceland as a Mediator and a Catalyst**

I will conclude this short analysis, let us consider a quote from W. H. Auden's poem *Journey to Iceland* featured in *Letters from Iceland*:

And the traveller hopes: "Let me be far from any

Physician"; and the ports have names for the sea;

The citiless, the corroding, the sorrow;

And North means to all: "Reject".

Bowering's story is a story of rejection and the triumph of weakness. Firstly, Bowering rejects the power of language, and exposes its weaknesses by the usage of non-verbal white circles. Secondly, he proposes a non-biased cultural consideration in the introduction quote but he renounces that in the story, exposing general human weaknesses of the main character. Thirdly, he rejects and mocks human technology and culture through ironic descriptions of the airplane and its travellers. In spite of all cultural knowledge and awareness, a trip from Canada via Iceland to Europe and back remains simply a trip into main character's inner longings and fears. Finally, he rejects unwanted memory, whatever that memory might be. This could be further expanded to refer to a general experience of immigrants leaving their homes for a new world, and trying to get rid of bad memories half way, however futile that is. Bowering describes Europe by rejecting to even talk about it as he basks in forgiving whiteness in and over Iceland. This might be both an ironic comment on the American understanding of Europe (and vice-versa) and a comment of the personal misconceptions of the main character, with Iceland serving as a mediator. So much rejection

and weaknesses exposed are best placed in a medial position in a story, and in hard conditions of an extreme climate. In that manner, Iceland becomes the main setting of the story, one of its main characters, and the main philosophical catalyst of the narration. And all that after being almost completely visually erased from the pages of the story.

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