Chapter VI

Imagining the ‘Other’ in Kerrisdale Elegies
Robert Kroetsch’s assertion that “Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern” (Norris 1984 : 1) however is not true of Canadian poetry, whose Modernist evolution has been gradual and at times fragmented and what can be considered to be Canadian Post-Modernist poetry bears a strong resemblance to the work of the early American and European Modernists (Norris 1). Modernist as a movement in most countries was “an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old culture was over, and a deep despairing in the face of fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expression of these things” (Bradbury and McFarlane quoted in Norris 4)

The McGill Movement and the poetic activity of the thirties provided the first tentative step in establishing Modernism in Canadian poetry. In the 1950s and 1960s there was an explosion on the literary scene and the ‘New Wave’ arrived with a diversified group, which included Leonard Cohen, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, Eli Mandel, Alden Nowlan and Daryl Hine. The Origin group, which included Charles Olson influenced the Canadian and Black Mountain group. They were also influenced by Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. The directives of these two poets, “Make it new” and “No ideas but in things”, were the guiding principles for these young Canadian and American poets. Charles Olson, who emerged as the main theorizer of
the Black Mountain group on the Canadian scene was also influenced by the poetic theories of E. E. Cummings. Charles Olson in his pivotal essay, “Projective Verse” develops a notion of poetry derived from human speech in its common form (Norris 60). The Black Mountain poetics was not an unified movement and literally revolutionized Canadian poetry. The pre-occupation with how the poem is to be put on the page points out that Black Mountain poetics were essentially technique-oriented; the central issue was one of poetic notion. Another key premise was that poetry was a vocal art. There was an effort to “free poetry from the trammels of end-rhyme and the metronomic regularity of metre, … to bring the language of poetry into the same realm as the speech of each individual” (Norris 102).

The Black Mountain influence on Canadian poetry was reflected in Tish poets and was seen as a “hopeful continuation of would-be-theoretical fulfillment” (Norris 99) of what the early Modernist fathers had proposed. The Tish group like the Black Mountain poets were intent on finding their way to freedom in poetry through form, especially the ‘open form’ propounded by Olson. This concept made free verse a more systematic form and heralded a new phrase referred to as ‘Post-Modernist’ by Olson himself.

The concept of “objectism” proposed by Olson involved a new stance towards reality and was central to the notion of projective verse. The concept of “objectism” involved:

getting rid of the lyrical interferences of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed
himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use

(Olson quoted in Norris 106).

Olson’s approach to reality incorporates man into an object-object relation rather a subject-object relation and does away with binary thinking typical of masculine mode of thinking. Olson also advocated the notion that the poet should stay “inside himself” and the Tish poets were proprioceptive, which meant that they “did not see a poem as something shaped by human intelligence that imposes its order upon language” (Norris 107), rather they followed Olson and saw poetry as a form of participation in a greater force. Black Mountain poetics was concerned with technique and with freedom from the imposition of abstract intelligence. Daphne Marlatt viewed the notion of proprioceptive similar to feminist bringing of the body into the act of writing (Carr 1991: 99).

Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Michael Ondaatje among others belonged to the Tish group. Kerrisdale Elegies (1984) located within postmodernist paradigm creates multiple meanings. Frank Davey’s commentary in “Reading Canadian Poetry” against commodification of literature in terms of thematic reading where the text is perceived as producing meaning that aggrandize a particular...
ideological status applies to this long poem which defies closure. “George Bowering’s concern is continually to evade the story, and he is far more useful about what writers do than how stories emerge. … What Bowering implicitly and continually returns to is consciousness and ego.” (Hunter 1991: 152)

This poem has been described by Robert Kroetsch as a poem which “confronts me radically as a writer” (Schellenberg 1986: 22). George Bowering in his interview states “I believe that my main … not theory, but…. desire, practice, in narrative, is to conceal. … There’s the concealment where the writer obscures autobiographical material, feeling, emotion. But there’s also concealment of what’s going on in the plot” (Schellenberg 16-17). Located within the dialogue about traditions in Canadian writing, the poem has been described by Robert Kroetsch as undermining the “notions of originality” (Schellenberg 10) and hence intertextuality is one of the features of the postmodern performance.

The ‘Elegies’ echoes many voices and has been described by many critics as an attempt by Bowering to “translate Rilke’s Duino Elegies” (Scobie 1989: 63) and in addition to the influence of Rilke, there is the influence of French Symbolists like Baudelaire and Mallarme, there is the epigraph stanza from Emily Dickinson, reference to H.D, quotation from Margaret Avison, dedication of ‘Elegy’ to Michael Ondaatje, general references to famous dead poets in “that great anthology”, allusions to various poets and vestiges of Bowering’s other poems resulting in the “poem’s doubling back on itself as it reconfigures certain clusters of thought and feeling in refrain and self-
All these contribute to making the poem being self-referential:

A highly self-conscious poem, at times about itself, so the reader is entertained with a view of the writer writing – discovering the poem – and is shown certain pressures of the passage of time on the very lines being read. In the postmodern way, then, the reader is shown the process of poem-making. In the case of Kerrisdale Elegies that means watching the tip of a living tradition unfold. (Dragland 119)

The postmodern mode finds Bowering’s breach of decorum and “the poet --- not living up to his materials”. As Bowering describes in his book Craft Slices (1985), “No artist can really create. He gathers and arranges materials found at hand – pebbles on a beach, song from the boughs, bright colours from the views of the earth, those materials that Nature shares with Herselves. The artist excels as he enters, not as he controls. He arranges himself among the particulars.

(Bowering 1985 : 126 – 7)

The Chapter seeks to interrogate the inscription of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ modes of thought in the Elegy where there is an implicit tension between pluralism and the desire for closure, with the poet being wary of this ambivalence. The Elegy begins with a sense of fragmentation and the feeling that the world cannot be sustained or created:

If one of them amazed me with an embrace
The desire to become a “lyric poet” and to “identify with heroes who die for love” representing masculine will be sought by the poet. The feminine is located within the masculine order, evoking fear and is often reduced to silence:

We reach for her,

We think we love her, because she

holds the knife

a knife-edge from our throat.

every fair heart

is frightful.

The construction of ‘feminine’ begins with the castration complex and the law of the phallus is imposed reflecting the Symbolic Order in the image of the lyric poet:

The symbolic is the point of organization, the point where sexuality is constructed as meaning, where what was heterogeneous, what was not symbolized becomes organized, becomes created round these two poles, masculine and not masculine: ‘feminine’

The feminine is associated with rupture and a threat to phallocentric and there is a desire expressed by the poet to capture them in his verse. The feminine has been
manifested in the “movie music”, “a maiden you could rescue” and “those dreams” which represent the notion of heterogeneity associated with the pre-Oedipal which the poet seeks to erase.

The ‘feminine’ as has been defined by French feminists represent a challenge to male-centred Western thinking. They provide a critique of Western culture, which they define as oppressive and phallogocentric:

‘I am the unified, self-controlled centre of the ‘universe’, man has claimed.’

The rest of the world, which I define as the other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man father, possessor of the phallus’. This claim to centrality has been supported not only by religion and philosophy, but also by language. To speak and especially to write from such a position is to appropriate the world, to dominate it through verbal mastery. Symbolic discourse is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speak in place of everything and everyone else — including women.

(Jones 1985: 87)

As Marie Carriere in her book Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada (2002), mentions that during the sixties and seventies in English Canada literary renaissance period the experimental poets which included Atwood, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Michel Ondaatje, Robert Kroetsch and George Bowering advocated the feminine in their poetics:

Especially relevant to writing in the feminine is the poetic advocated by Tish, rejecting the unitary solipsistic self, the yearning for a lost order and the beliefs
in the timelessness of poetry — Tish writing measured verification according to breath, indulging the element of speech — Reality was not rendered inaccessible or non existent, about mediated or represented by subjective perception. The self-conscious, often playful fore grounding of language in dealings or the everyday also anticipates similar theories and forms of writing explored by some feminist writers. In short, Tish constituted a new postmodern' poetics that was constructionist as well as phenomological.

(Carriere 2002: 21-5)

The Elegies can be located within some of the intellectual paradigms mentioned above. The poems reflect a “condition of writing and reading, indeed opening up unknown and unspoken dimension of reality” (Carriere 54). Phallocentric dichotomies – woman as the negative of man, arguing within a system where woman stands outside and reflects intellectual obfuscation has been brought out through the image of ‘Queen Marilyn’ who made silly movies. However she is a multiple signifier and her ‘shiny breasts will fall in the hands of our weeping poets’. There is a constant movement between the masculine and the feminine positions and the text will not uphold any fixed truth, since as a cultural icon, she represents commodification of literature and criticism and hence represents androcentric closure. However there is also under erasure the attempt to decentralize ideological control. The ‘feminine’ is the sub-text which, is not a counter text but a challenge to resist fixed meaning and inscribes pluralism manifested through the image of the weeping poets:

Queen Marilyn made silly
Movies, but she’s
The stuff our words are made from,
- Her shiny breasts.
Fill the hands of our weeping poets.

(Bowering 20)

The world of the Elegy is one where there are no grand narratives and nothing to turn to, but to “fling your arms wide / into the juicy air, chuck your ardent loneliness” (Bowering 11). The text proposes “mystery” and “void” which embodies an alternative to the Law of the father:

We need the mystery,
we need the grief that makes us long for our
dead friends,
We need that void for our poems.
We be dead without them.

(Bowering 19)

The ‘void’ allows for alternative space to emerge in the text, where pre-Oedipal feminine position is at play and an “alternative symbolic universe” (Mitchell 428) is shaped. The alternative space is the space where the ‘feminine’ art is at play. The void and mystery represents language outside the grid of masculine/symbolic language representing the pre-Oedipal feminine. In this space “iconclasty” to borrow Sharon Thesan’s term will be manifested. The observation of Sharon Thesan in her essay, ‘Poetry and the dilemma of expression’ in the context of women writers trying to
create feminine texts can be applied to define the nature of ‘void’ and ‘nature’, which is an “attempt to recover and to cherish an authentically feminine force; vision and voice at least partly to contradict the necrophilia of the times” (Thesen 1986 : 384).

The void and mystery defy any classification located within dominant ideology and the poet will be free from masculine kind of order in terms of logic and cause-and-effect and represents an attempt to traverse male ‘logos’. Foucault’s notion of ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ in terms of reappearance of a particular knowledge is also visible in the notion of void and mystery. The Elegies by “partly refusing to settle on any easy or fixed position” (Stewart 1989 : 59) embraces the ‘feminine’ position which is concealed and the revelation of which constitutes deconstructive reading.

As mentioned earlier there is a constant movement between masculine and feminine position and in ‘Elegy 2’ there is a celebration of logocentric viewpoint with the poet responding to this position. Logocentric viewpoint in the Elegy emerges in the image of the ‘Dead poet’s voice’, which as Lola Lemire Tostevin in her essay, ‘Breaking the hold on the story: the feminine economy of language’ has described as “a structure made up of differences where individual terms hold no positive value and meaning becomes possible only through a function of differences between terms.” By applying Saussure’s principles to the study of anthropology and psychoanalysis, the fathers of the structuralist movement, Levi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida and Lacan, argued that ultimately all culturally phenomenon could be reduced to systematic codes.
where each individual code or cultural element received its meaning from its relationship to other elements constituting a particular system” (Tostevin 1986 : 385) :

Dead poet’s voices I have heard my head in my head
Are not terrifying
They are worth speaking to

(Bowering 23)

The voices of dead poets can be interpreted as the manifestation of Harold Bloom’s model of literary history, which is intensely male and “necessarily patriarchal” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979 : 47):

That writers assimilate and them consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievement of their predecessors, is of course a central fact of literary history --- Most recently some literary theorists have begun to explore what we might call the psychology of literary history – the tensions and anxieties, hostilities and inadequacies, writers feel when they confront not only the achievements of their predecessors but the traditions of genre style and metaphor that they inherit from such “forefathers’. Increasingly --- critics study the ways in which, as J. Hillis Miller has put it, a literary text is inhabited ---- by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests ghosts of previous texts.

(Gilbert and Gubar 46)

Applying Freudian theory to literary production Harold Bloom has pointed that the “dynamics of literary history arise from the artist’s “anxiety of influence”, his fear
that he is not his own creation and that the work of his predecessors existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings” (Gilbert and Gubar 46). Bloom explains that a “strong poet” must engage in a literary warfare with his “precursor” which is a literary Oedipal struggle, and the poet can become a poet by invalidating his poetic father. Bloom’s “anxiety of influence a masculine position has been juxtaposed with “intertextuality” representing the feminine position where pluralism prevail and the text reflects the flux. The voice of dead poets representing the androcentric/logocentric position in terms of writing anchored in established tradition will be deconstructed by “our lines/appearing among them” and create a richly textured body, where texture represents the feminine principle and logos the masculine principle which as Derrida writes in Of Grammatology “aims at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command” (Derrida quoted in Tostevin 387):

Will the dead poets notice our lines
appearing among them,
or are their ears filled with their own music

(Bowering 27)

However as mentioned earlier, the poetics of postmodern brings in poetry, which has avowed itself as anti-representational, anti-referential and wages an attack on writing’s preoccupation with representation. Therefore what is resisted is not reality, but the notion of an immediate, transparent representation of reality through language:
We are evaporating
as our heroes did.
We cannot pursue our fragments
As they separate into earth and stars

(Bowering 34)

Writing in the feminine as reflected in the poetry allies itself with formalist and
postmodern revisiting of form and literary conventions, as well as questioning of
Western Master narratives based on notions of universality and objectivity. However
for some postmodern writings the critique of established literary and cultural
conventions does not include those epistemological positions that support and continue
sexual oppression:

Postmodern writings may subvert and transgress the dominant discourses of
Western culture and the notions of unity or homogeneity that characterize them
without seeing this problem. Postmodern incredulity can even reveal what
Paterson calls a ‘liberalism illusoire’, which either ignores the problem of
patriarchy as one of these master narratives, or reinforces a phallocentric view of
the world and of the other (of woman).

(Carriere 23)

In ‘Elegy 3’ we come across fragmentation, convoluted and incomplete ideas
accompanied by a yearning for mastery over the other. The sign ‘a vulnerable thing’
represents that point which harbors, what Derrida describes as ‘the unbalancing of the
equation’, whereby the balance between the reader and writer is disturbed and the text
embraces contradiction. The sign can be defined as a feminine sign, since there is a
differential play of signifiers in terms of writing veering towards liberating itself from
constraints of language:

he blushes with hunger

she knows nothing about.

What a vulnerable thing she is

in her crisp white summer dress

(B Bowering 37)

There is tension in the Elegy between the desire to self-annihilate and restore order and seek a centre:

He loves the terror prior to

dearth life.

You

would hate it you knew

He loves

the collapsing bridge he is

running upon

In this dream inside his dream

he knows he will

make it, ---

(B Bowering 44)
The masculine subject is both, under threat and attracted to the relational form of identity associated with the feminine. If repudiation of the mother is essential for entry into the masculine, this process is never compete and collapsing back into the feminine maternal is always present. Mother figure appears several times in the Elegy and there is certain ambivalence since at times the ‘mother’ is part of the cosmology where the maternal, semiotic is celebrated and provides space for alternative worlds to emerge as mentioned earlier. Simultaneously there is the desire to arrest this dialogic condition, since writing is an activity that takes place in the Father’s House; and the house is a metaphor for prevailing artistic, linguistic and ideological structures, which are masculine in nature and the poet seeks to locate himself in this position and hence he seeks to soar where “there are no mothers” (Bowering 43):

but he dreams too;

and where he now soars

there are no mothers,

(Bowering 43)

But there is a desire to return to the maternal embrace and reject it and thereby create the humanist ego-centered Cartesian subject:

He

is among the dreadful ancestors

he knew

before you felt him kick inside
The ‘dreadful ancestors’ is an extension of the image of the ‘voice of the dead poets’ of the earlier elegy and had been a source of inspiration. While there is a rejection of conservative political male establishment, there is also a refusal to inscribe the female in the Symbolic Order that has always been interpreted within masculine order. The poet takes up the position of the subject within the discourse of male/sexual drive and the woman is the object:

As I watch you walk,

your white dress

falling around your thighs in

the starlight

I love you for everybody you have

been ---

A gentle painter caught you

in that quattrocento oil you saw

in Florence last December.

Maternal politics emerges as a contested site in the Elegy, since it provides a critique of andocentric politics and there is a yearning for the absent mother. However the mother has simultaneously been portrayed as fearful and there is a movement to efface the ‘female’ from the social and culture spheres. The Oedipal situation is
presented, where the son has to murder his mother symbolically before he can enter the masculine order. The mother figure’ in ‘Elegy 3’ represents the devouring mother:

Mother you have lovers too,
they stir in their amour ---
Men are beating each other below
Mount Cyllene
for the right to bring you an
asphodel.
Widow detest you,
their grown children lust for
you.

(Bowering 47)

In ‘Elegy 4’ the entry in the Symbolic Order is heralded with complete identification with the “Father Voice” which has been privileged over “Mother’s Hand” and “my sister’s fierce hand”. The Symbolic Order has been identified by Helene Cixous as a masculine libidinal economy, an economy that does not allow for opposites to prevail and maintain disjunction through a constant play of deferring of fixed meaning. At the metaphoric level, the text seeks to locate itself within the homologic discourse of male/not male, where the patriarchal woman is sought and woman becomes a phantasm, where “the woman is spoken for but does not speak in the discourse of a culture where women function as reproductive Other and, therefore, as fragmented body” (Neuman 1986: 399):
At my father’s funeral I held my
Mother’s hand
and my sister’s fierce hand,
and heard my father’s voice

(Bowering 56)

There is inscription of omnipresent masculine order and poet is well grounded within
the phallocentric order:

I speak to him now in all my poems
my body
speaks to him & every time I look at it.
--- I am staring at this sound
coming out blue so hard,
another voice
must mix with its own
A dead poet or father.

(Bowering 54 & 58)

There is archaic murder of the maternal that underlies and precedes patriarchal culture
in the West as Luce Irigaray has described in ‘Speculum of the Other Woman’:

The denial of subjectivity to woman is without doubt the foundation underlying
every irreducible constitution of an object: whether in representation, discourse,
or desire---

(Irigaray quoted in Smart 1991:1)
However there is no fixed position, and the poet aligns himself with the feminine position, when the poet views himself as marginalized as opposed to the dominant position. This displacement is also an attempt to move beyond polarities and logocentric boundaries and deconstruct “negative polemics and give birth to multiplicity” (Harasym 1986: 331). There is juxtaposing of phallogocentric in the figure of parent with the feminine, since the “solitude was pictured/between stars”. The speaking voice re-creates the space where the process of writing is linked to the process of creating desire and multiplicity:

I knew my solitude was pictured
between stars,
knew a long-dead Vizier read it on
a screen
and approved,
as no parent could.

(Bowering 61)

‘Elegy 5’ is an elegy about base-ball from the beginning to the end. Baseball is the “game of boyhood” and the ball park is “the fancied green of our wishes” and watching the game in such pastoral surroundings creates a moment of equilibrium that transcends the game:

I sit in section nine and sometimes wonder why
But know I am at ground zero
where art is made,
where there is no profit
no loss.

(Bowering 73)

In this essay, ‘Baseball and the Canadian Imagination’, Bowering has described baseball as a multi-layered symbol:

Baseball is postmodernism. It is just above all signifier, very little signified, at least in a metaphorical sense.

(Bowering 47)

The image of baseball provides a critique of intellectualism and disembodied bodies of knowledge and the Elegy demonstrates the impossibility of ‘living in the head’ the role assigned to men within patriarchal ideology. And “yet this obvious victimization --- neither excuses nor fully explains their inability to conceive of ways of seeing, knowing and representing the real that would challenge the pornographic relation between subject and object” (Smart 268). And the victimization or entrapment within masculine order is reflected in the image of the ball girl. And what emerges is that “reification of women as the essential component, and not just a coincidental side-effect, of the construction of male identity, the truth that the son is unable to face, the illusion he refuses to abandon in spite of the fact that he himself is dying of asphyxiation in the Father’s House--- “(Smart 268):

I watch her blossom these years,
call her Debbie though I don’t know her
she sits in a simple folding chair next
to the stands,
glove on her hand,
blonde hair spilling from her cap,
long tan thighs.
tall, white sox.
She is not baseball at all,
but a harmless grace here,
a tiny joy
glimpsed one time each inning,
when she bends,
and, oh God give us extra innings.

(Bowering 71)

As Laura Mulvey in her essay ‘Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema has described:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking
has been split between active / male and passive / female.
The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to be – looked – at – ness

(Mulvey 1997 : 442)
The theme of a submerged, potentially subversive memory continuous and traces of a “maternal memory can be heard, where language becomes a form of textual otherness which interferes with the laws of representation, meaning, codification” (Carriere 103). In her essay ‘Poetry, Memory and the Polis’, Erin Moure describes the Law as “the anesthesia of our memories; it is the force that pulls us toward the centre, centripetal. To make us forget, or repress, or define in terms acceptable to the Order” (Carriere 103). The tension prevails in the Elegy and the poet seeks to “escape from your dark embrace” (Bowering 87) and inscribe himself in the Symbolic Order of “logo centric and hetrocentric thinking” (Carriere 103):

--- His first miracle

was his escape from your dark embrace

(Bowering 87)

In “Elegy 7” there is inscription of the ‘feminine ‘ and the text becomes subversive and announces the arrival of a “listener who has not announced herself” (Bowering 93). The poet will speak a language which he is now learning hoping that the listener will listen only to realize that “she is yourself out there” (Bowering 93).

Writing in the poem as Helena Cixous has described becomes bisexual recalling Virginia Woolf’s notion of androgyny. The language which he tries to learn can refer to the ‘semiotic language’. The semiotic breaks through the symbolic from time to time and is associated with the pre-Oedipal stage of unity with mother. Writing in the feminine causes rupture and results in writing, which as Julia Kristeva mentions is available to all speaking subjects prepared to take on bisexuality:
All speaking subjects have within themselves a certain bisexualuality which is precisely the possibility to explore all the sources of signification, that which posits a meaning as well as that which multiplies pulverises and finally revives it.

(Kriesteva quoted in Mills 1998 : 69-70)

For Kriesteva invoking the semiotic will challenge the foundation of phallic position. And the Elegy reflects this viewpoint:

Lighting and love,
if spring were here.
she would listen and nod her head,
your music
would announce her erotic shape
Everywhere.

(Bowering 94)

However ‘father’s voice’ is heard in the andocentric closure evident in the poem:

Powerful voice,
--- We should never forget then
They are made from dead poet’s voice

(Bowering 96)

‘Dead poets’ voice’ merging with ‘powerful voice’ emerges as a universal signifier envisioning centrality connecting the various units of the poem. However the desire to resist the institutional practices in terms of existing epistemologies is heard:
I force my daughter
to learn the name if the continents
names
that share the past
--- The robin sees me coming
his act
is not fear,
he moves only to keep his eye on me
He will eat and fly and die,
and reach eternity
without naming it.

(Bowering, 108)

The existential angst in the Elegy points to the problematic nature of relations based on hierarchical dualisms represented in the image of “miserly Latin master” (Bowering 109). The need to escape from this domain and visit the “domain of not-being” (Bowering 109) has been articulated in a prominent manner. The domain of ‘not-being’ is a space where language and its relation to referents breaks down and a discourse is constituted in terms of site where ‘writings’ is allowed to prevail and the existing binaries between masculine/feminine economy mentioned earlier breaks down. Fragmentation is visible and writing is freed from teleological agenda. The ‘Other’ is desired and language does not reflect a particular reality and the Elegy embraces feminine and the maternal has been introduced and the Elegy crosses hierarchies and
polemic boundaries between masculine and feminine. The domain of not-being becomes the “site of desire, the experience of lack, the effect of the condition imposed by the division between conscious and unconscious, repressed, yet --- in continuous relationship with consciousness” (Cameron 1986: 143). The ‘I’ which thinks in the Elegy univocally will be open to shifts, gaps, eruptions and fissures and hence the language of speaking subject will be “equivocal, figurative, symptomatic” (Cameron 143) and subverts the ‘I’ of the Symbolic Order:

I have my fingers before her face.
I’m afraid
she’s visiting the domain of not-being,
not-bothering – to – be,

(Bowering 109)

‘Elegy 9’ begins with the search for “invisible meaning”, (Bowering 126) a language which will speak about “those lovers in the car” (Bowering 124) in his poem, thereby breaking established institutional norms. For the first time, there is a rejection of the “ghastly dead” (Bowering 126) and the Elegy provides space for a new subjectivity to take shape which is androgyneous:

I know you want to grow again
in another soil,
if that’s what I am
To disappear
and live again income
--- Lightning and Love,

if Spring comes again she will nod her

head

in my heart

--- Now I’m new

husband,

now I am something like two

(Bowering 128)

The concept of something like two “can be read as an attempt to decenter the subject implying a postmodern critique of a fixed subject position. The text opens up to the tension between the constituted subject (masculine subject position) and the constituting subject – the subject position which is transcendent and autonomous. The most powerful critique of the constituting subject comes from Foucault who argues, “that the transcendental constituting subject of the Cartesian tradition is inadequate to describe the condition of subjects in the contemporary world subject who are constituted by the powerful forces of modern life” (Susan Hekman 1991 : 45). The speaking voice in the Elegy is not a monolithic voice and occupies various subject position as mentioned by Foucault beyond the subject – positions mentioned above. However since the Elegy is located within the postmodern paradigm, which argues that the oppositions are only apparent and the polarities inhabit each other :

Postmodern emphasis the way in which subject are constituted within discursive formations. But they do not place the constituting subject with the constituted
subject. Rather, they advance a conception of the subject that explores the
polarity between the constituted and the constituting by displacing the
opposition.

(Hekman 47)

This position has been exemplified by the feminist critic Teresa de Lauretis, who
explains:

Although individuals are constructed by ---“codes and social
formations, they are able to rework these influences in their
own particular ways and thus avoid complete determination
by them.

(Hekman 49)

The subject position occupied by each individual . : retains the “capacity to
constitute a particular subjective construction from the various ideological formations
to which he or she is subject to” (Hekman 49). Subjectivity then is an on-going
process:

It is produced not by external idea values, or material causes, but by one’s
personal subjective engagement in the
practices, discourses and institutions that lend
significance (value, meaning effect) to the events of
the world.

(Hekman 49)
The shifting subject position reflected in the poem through the concept of “something like two” provide a critique of “three categories – subject of knowledge, masculinity and the speaking subject – the subject of knowledge is explicitly positioned in the role of male speaker” (Ofelia Schutte 1991 : 66)

“Elegy 10” prepares us for intimations of immortality and an entry into after life. There is a blurring of identity between dead and living and makes the reader realize that there is no consolation in any traditional knowledge. Rather like ‘Elegy 9’ in this elegy the reader is told to look forward to re-aligning one’s ideological location and this “requires an extraordinary devotion to loving, praising the world, a superhuman direction of attention to what will pass if not rebuilt, piece by piece, inside, by people become poets, in thought if not in word” (Dragland 121). The position mentioned above is one seeking a centre, an androcentric position endorsed by the poet:

But as he goes,

his going lifts our eyes;

we see

a little more from time to time

November sun

on the maples cushioning moss,

bamboo canes

across the corner of a window,

he leaves us this;
we rush to call it meaning.

(Bowering 146)

The Elegies can read as a passionate and painful search for meaning although simultaneously there is a resistance to certainty and the tension is present in all the elegies. The ‘branch where a singing bird will stand for a moment’ in Elegy 2, will become ‘an old singing branch, and will call out to “those who died in their first cantos” in Elegy 10. The movement is not linear leading to resolutions, but there is an erasure of meaning and the unwriting of the poem. George Bowering’s comments about fiction in ‘Sheila Watson : Trickter’ fits Kerrisdale Elegies:

--- the post – modernists live in a second stage of twentieth century irony, and they are interested in some kind of reconstruction beyond despair – that is why their fictions are characterized by both laughter and non-realistic treatment.

(Dragland 131)

The poem is about the growth of the artist, with Bowering himself at the centre of the poem, yet the autobiographical elements have been handled with irony.

The chapter has tried to read Kerrisdale Elegies, a postmodern text in terms of lack of stable meanings, no fixed centre, play of multiple voices and fragmented subjectivity. The composition of the poem moves away from orthodox ways of viewing and telling and thereby inscribes the ‘feminine’:

Bowering avoids morality. As with many of his postmodern peers, there is a higher and more common purpose to his art. He wants nothing less than to give
his reader life, and himself in the process. The ambiguity stands. This is what his fiction says: the barriers between life and art must fall; let’s meet in the text for a while, free among words to become ourselves. It was inevitable; inevitable that writers like Bowering would conceive fiction as the interpenetration of personalities.

(Moss 1989:87)