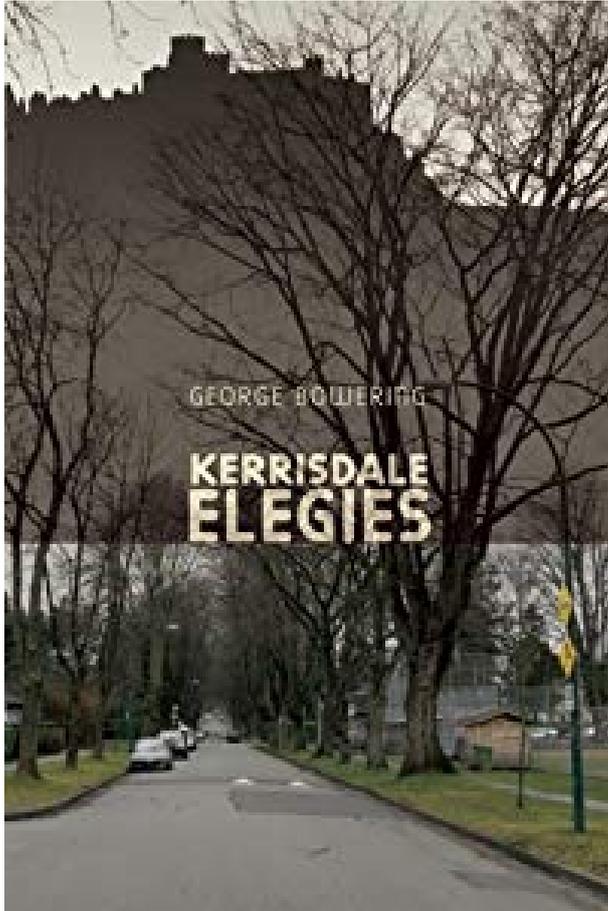


Kerrisdale Elegies



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It is extraordinary that one can take the measure of how radically cultural sensibilities can change throughout a century by a careful reading of only two texts—in this case Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, written in the midst of the First World War, and George Bowering’s brilliant response to Rilke’s call, the *Kerrisdale Elegies*, composed in the midst of the Cold War. Rilke’s poem begins and ends with a modernist appeal to the transcendent.

It opens with; “Who, if I were to scream, would then hear me, among the angelic orders . . . ,” and ends with a nostalgic evocation of the muse of grief attendant at the spectacle of the sacrifice of youth; “we who aspire to an ascendant fortune, are overcome by astonishment at the fortunate’s fall.” [Rilke’s italics] Compare to Bowering’s opening; “If I did complain, who among my friends would hear?” and his closing; “The single events that raise our eyes and stop our time are saying goodbye, lover, goodbye.” Bowering’s *Kerrisdale Elegies* are a profoundly compelling illustration of Pound’s instruction to all translators—to “make it new.” In the intertextuality of these two great masterworks is to be found the birth of a post-modern writing that is self-aware, where the other is discovered in the process of the writer writing, and is not a referent, neither secular nor divine, outside of the text itself, and therefore ultimately estranged from both the writer and the reader. Williams’ dictum, too, that writers should write “no ideas but in things” so thoroughly infuses

Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*, that while they are an exact equivalent to Rilke's emblematic masterpiece—separated as they are by three generations of one of the most tumultuous centuries in human history—they are not a translation, but a living, vibrant transformation of the work.