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Edgar Bowers & Allen Tate

by David Yezzi

Part A: Introduction

I want to thank Victoria Steele and Thomas Wortham for having me as a part of this wonderful event, and Kevin Durkin who, through his sterling work in the Bowers archive, allowed me access to some of the materials that I'll be referring to this morning.

I knew Edgar Bowers only briefly, in San Francisco, in the last years of his life. I had come to Stanford from New York in 1998, as a Stegner Fellow in poetry, and my wife and I lived on the corner of Broadway and Octavia in San Francisco, not far from Edgar's apartment on Greenwich Street, at the top of that enormous hill overlooking the water. Occasionally, he would have me up to his apartment to talk about poetry. And I would try to ride my bicycle up that steep incline, or at least part-way up, until I had to get off and push. Edgar was always a very gracious host. He never let on that the review I had written some years before of his Collected Poems was anything other than competent and thoughtful. In fact, it wasn't really either of those things, despite my best intentions.

In my own defense, I should say that Edgar's poems were difficult for me then, and are often difficult for me still. Edgar said that he wanted to write poems that people would return to, rather than ones that would be read once and discarded. Each time I go back to his work -- which rewards endless rereading -- I find something I've overlooked, or I understand a poem in a new light. "Light," by the way, is a recurring image in Bowers's poems "Autumn Shade" and "Grove and Building," for example, and I will return to that in a moment. In my remarks today, I'd like to say a few words about the light shed on Edgar Bowers's poetry by the poetry of Allen Tate.

Part B: Biographical

To begin with, I should mention a couple of biographical similarities: (both poets received the Bollingen Prize, by the way):

Allen Tate was born near Lexington, Kentucky, in 1899 -- on my birthday actually, or rather I was born on his birthday, November 19. Due to his father's faltering finances, the Tate's moved frequently when he was a boy. His mother was an avid reader and instilled this love of books in Tate.

Edgar Bowers was born in Rome, Georgia, in 1924, and, though this was a generation later, their backgrounds were not wholly dissimilar. Bowers, as he said, "grew up all over the South," moving from state to state, before settling in Decatur. His earliest exposure to literature was presumably through his mother, who was a teacher. Both Tate and Bowers excelled early on in languages, a fact that would affect them both as poets.

Bowers described himself as a "child of the South"; Tate's biographer, Thomas A. Underwood, subtitled volume one of his life of Tate "Orphan of the South." And there is a sense in which both remained attached to the South, while leaving it, or, in a sense, being left by it.

Both were poets of passion and faith, or perhaps of the end of faith, but of course in very different ways. And I'll say more about that in a moment.

When Tate was an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in the early Twenties, he came across H. L. Mencken's excoriating essay on the dismal state of culture in the South entitled "The Sahara of Bozart." In it, Mencken writes that "down there [meaning in the South] a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe-player, a dry-point etcher, or a metaphysician.' Now, Tate thought this was pretty terrific, and he conspicuously carried a copy of Mencken's essays

around campus with him. Tate felt that he and his fellow Fugitives were the antidote to what he called the "sweetness and light school" then prevalent in the South. And of course he was right about that.

There is a sense in which Tate was the conduit through which modernism and modern poetry reached the South, and, both by training and temperament, he was the perfect vehicle to carry the news. John Crowe Ransom described Tate in those years at Vanderbilt as having had:

literary resources that were not the property of our region at that time. . . . Besides the part [of this new literature] that was indigenous to our language, there was the literature of nineteenth-century France, which after the necessary lag was being imported in volume. Allen in his student days was reading Baudelaire and Mallarme.

Tate embraced the poetry of T. S. Eliot, in a way that Ransom did not. He also embraced the poetry of the French poets that Eliot read, such as Jules Laforgue and others.

The story of how Tate discovered Eliot is noteworthy. In 1922, Tate received a letter from a stranger, a young poet named Hart Crane, who had seen an early poem of Tate's in a magazine called The Double Dealer. Crane wrote to Tate that based on his poem it was clear that Tate had been reading T. S. Eliot, a poet that Crane was enormously taken with at that time. As it turned out, Tate had not yet read Eliot,

but proceeded to familiarize himself with his work. And by Tate's own admission Eliot exerted a profound influence on him. In terms of the poetry, one might even say too profound. So this was Tate's road to modern poetry: through nineteenth-century French poetry and, by way of Crane, through Eliot.

Edgar Bowers's road to modern poetry was also through nineteenth-century French poetry and also through T. S. Eliot, although in his case, by way of Allen Tate. And here's how that happened: when Bowers entered the Army Special Training Program at Princeton University he was 19. An undated journal entry describes his time there as: "the single most significant event of my life. . . . I went there one person and left another." He then goes on to speak of the influence exerted on his sensibility by one of his roommates, Tom Cassilly, whom he describes in the journal as "better educated than I and considerably more sophisticated." [Tom], he continues, "had been a student of Allen Tate at Princeton and was well acquainted with modern literature and the 'party line.'" Now, this party line was basically T. S. Eliot and the modernism of the New Critics.

Bowers later said in a radio interview, that Cassilly introduced him to "the whole canon, so to speak, of modernism. . . . I had never heard of T. S. Eliot when I was 19 years old [Bowers explained]. And so I became acquainted

with them and with modern critics. This young man had been a student of Allen Tate at Princeton, and so that was very valuable to me." Bowers would later say that he "grew up with Allen Tate." Cassilly and Bowers were inseparable during their time at Princeton, going to class together, eating together, and going to New York together.

Incidentally, I recently met with Tom Cassilly, who, nearing eighty, now lives in New York City, and he told me something of his time with Bowers and, earlier, of his time with Allen Tate at Princeton. Cassilly had taken a creative writing course with Allen Tate and R. P. Blakmur. William Arrowsmith was also in that class. Cassilly remembers Bowers telling him that he would have loved to have been in that class. Cassilly described how the students and Tate would get together at a university hangout called The Balt, a coffee shop, and talk about poetry. He remembers telling Edgar about that, and about reading "The Waste Land" and "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in Tate's class. The class also read Dubliners, Madame Bovary, and Racine's Phaedre. They also read Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

While at ASTP, Bowers and Cassilly studied French with Maurice Coindreau, who had translated Hemingway, Faulkner and Dos Passos, basically introducing modern American fiction to France.

Of the influence of all of this on his poetic development Bowers has said that:

The writers I knew best were the writers I had studied in high school, Romantic and Victorian English writers and a few Americans like William Cullen Bryant, for example. . . . while I was in the Army amazingly enough, I started reading these French poets. And so those are the people I knew, and looking for some kind of structure of my own, I see now something of that in [my own poems].

What that "something" is we'll look at in a minute.

After the War, Bowers returned to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to complete his undergraduate work. His fellow poets urged him to go on to study with Yvor Winters at Stanford University, which he did. Now as you all know, Winters was an important champion of Bowers work and also a longtime correspondent of Tate. At one point, Winters writes to Tate:

If Ed Bowers's poem on a mountain cemetery were published anonymously in one of our quarterlies, and the readers were asked to guess the authorship, no one would guess me, but a number would guess you [meaning Tate]. I have been trying for two years to iron your individual eccentricities out of his style without damaging what he has learned of you that is impersonal.

And I'll come back to this idea of impersonality in a moment. (Interestingly, Winters was the link between Bowers and Tate, but he doesn't seem to have been able to interest

Tate in Bowers, despite sending him a copy of The Form of Loss, which Tate never acknowledged.

Part C: Aesthetic Comparison

So this is how Bowers became aware of Tate. What then was the influence, if any? I should start by saying that I don't mean to suggest that Tate and Bowers embraced modernism in a wholesale way. Tate in his later work, as A. K. Whitehead has pointed out, was "strictly of the older tradition," bringing modernism more in line with traditional verse. However, both Tate and Bowers were keenly aware of the modernism that had grown up thorough French poetry in the nineteenth century and both incorporated Symbolist elements into their work.

Tate's strongest hold on Bowers's poems can be seen in The Form of Loss. Bowers himself once explained at a reading he gave at the University of Provence how the kind of poem he was writing in that first book was basically learned from Tate, Crane, and others. I should preface the following quotation by saying that Bowers was speaking from what might be thought of as his post-Tate phase, looking back on his earlier poems at considerable and critical distance.

Of "The Stoic: To Laura Van Courtland," Bowers said that

this particular poem shows certain contemporary notions of what you should do in a poem -- really influenced probably by William Butler Yeats and by Ezra Pound and probably Allen Tate, poets like that, Hart Crane, say -- that a poem should be about something important to start with, and socially, philosophically. It should have an important impersonal theme in it about that kind of subject.

This notion of impersonality conjures the ghost of T. S. Eliot here (and of the Parnassians, as Kenneth Fields has already explained), but it also conjures the ghost of Allen Tate. Robert Lowell recalls his first meeting with Tate: Tate's "second pronouncement [on that occasion, Lowell writes] was that a good poem has nothing to do with exalted feelings of being moved by the spirit. It was simply a piece of craftsmanship, an intelligible or cognitive object."

Now there are ways in which we'll see that Bowers later turned against the aesthetic of Tate, but this notion of a poem as a well-made object was an idea of Tate's that he shared throughout his career. "The Stoic," Bowers went on to explain,

also illustrates another cliché of my time: [that you must] have violence in your poem. . . . Now of course that belonged to my subject, [again he's talking here about the War] but also that you must have striking memorable images.

So far we've had impersonality, striking images, and the craftsmanship of well-made traditional forms: now add to that this notion of violence that Bowers describes.

I would argue that this notion of violence is Tate's greatest poetic legacy. In an essay, I wrote a few years ago called "The Violence of Allen Tate," I gave a number of examples of the violent imagery and diction in Tate's poems and the influence of that violence on the work of Crane, Lowell, and Geoffrey Hill, as well as suggesting a connection to Bowers's work. Here is just one example, in Tate's own words of the kind of effect that he prized. Tate was writing about the work of others, but I also understand him to be writing about himself:

The verbal shock, the violent metaphor, as a technique of magic, forces into linguistic existence subjective meanings and insights that poets can no longer discover in the common world.

Part D: The Turning Away

Now in his later poetry, Bowers subsequently turned against this practice, creating very different kinds of poems, namely what he called "erotic elegies" and portrait poems given, as he said, with little emotion, commentary, or judgment. The rhetoric in these poems was consciously simplified, using shorter sentences, for example. These

later poems eschewed those very qualities that Bowers associated with Tate and others, namely the virtuoso and flamboyant aspects of the poems. As he described the portrait poems "Mary" and "Richard," there is "not any striking detail, not any impressive image, not a building up toward some kind of powerful climax, but just telling a story about an ordinary person who turns out to be a heroin."

As he explained, Bowers begins to the style of someone like [Ben] Jonson, "this kind of fine, hard, quiet style, which seemed to make the poems of my own virtuoso youth a little on the flamboyant side. . ." And so, in this way, he left these aspects of Tate's influence behind in his later work.

Part E: Shadow and Shade & Grove and Building

Finally, I like to turn to the handout for a quick comparison of two poems: "Shadow and Shade" by Tate and "Grove and Building" by Bowers.

I should mention that Tate's poem "Shadow and Shade," which is by no means one of his better-known efforts was listed on Yvor Winters's syllabus for a course on "Chief American

Poets." This syllabus was discovered among Edgar Bowers's papers.

Both poems strike me as heavily indebted to Valery (and of course Bowers's poem carries an epigraph from Valery), and both employ what Yvor Winters defined as the post-Symbolist method. The poet Clive Wilmer has explained post-Symbolism as follows:

The Symbolists proceed by association of images and their purpose is to elude intellectual analysis. Bowers, Stevens, Valery, and one or two others, Winters argues [and here I would suggest that occasionally Tate approaches this as well], incorporate the associative method into structures as rational and consecutive as those of Renaissance poetry. The poems, though paraphrasable, are thus rendered slightly mysterious, enriched by the sensuous detail and the musical process of association.

What is striking about the comparison of "Grove and Building" with "Shadow and Shade" is that not only do they both employ the post-Symbolist method, but they both draw from similar systems of image and metaphor, namely that of light and shadow, which I mentioned at the outset.

Tate's poem deals with fear, desire and death. The shadow of desire eases but does wholly obliterate the shade of fear.

Bowers's poem, as Helen Pinkerton has written, suggests the tension between the "pure intelligibility" or the unshadowed being of divinity symbolized by the sun and the "building" which is the product of human intelligence.

Note the way that both make use of the image of shadow broken up by leaves, creating an effect of fragmentation in each. What these systems point to, in other words the specific tenor of each poem, may be different, but both the method and the manner show strong similarities.

Part F: Conclusion

Now all of this is not to suggest that Edgar Bowers wrote like Allen Tate, and idea that Edgar would have been to polite to disparage to my face, but rather that for a poet of Edgar's generation and background Tate represented a climate, a dominant mode, a way of working. This method helped Bowers to produce some of his greatest poems. That he later outgrew these methods is part of any really fine poets natural evolution. That it was a positive and fruitful influence while it lasted, I hope I've shown. Thank you.