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Conference and Exhibition April 11, 2003**

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Edgar Bowers and England

by Dick Davis

Anyone familiar with Edgar's poetry is aware that there is a recognizable break between the publication of *Living Together*, (1973), and *For Louis Pasteur*, (1989). We are not only talking about quite a considerable period of time (sixteen years) in which Edgar published no new collection, but there is also to some extent a break in style and subject matter between these two volumes. The relatively prolonged silence before the appearance of *For Louis Pasteur* can in fact be extended backwards for a few years, as *Living Together* is basically his first two volumes bound as one, with a handful of poems omitted, and it contains only six new poems, only one of which is of a substantial length. It seems then generally true to say that after the publication of *The Astronomers* (1965) Edgar entered on a relatively barren period as a poet, the end of which was signaled by the appearance of *For Louis Pasteur* over twenty years later.

What enabled him to emerge from this barren patch, and to produce a volume that was startlingly more relaxed and personal in tone than his often lapidary and Parnassian earlier work? There cannot be a simple answer to the complicated question of why a poet writes as he does when he does, or of why he falls silent when he does. But it has been suggested by a number of people who knew Edgar well that one factor that helped him to emerge from this long poetic silence, and I emphasize it is only one factor, was his becoming friends with a group of younger British poets, who frankly admired his work more than they admired that of almost any of his contemporaries, and who, when they met him, frankly admired him as a person, and were happy to count themselves among his friends. There comes a moment in a poet's life – in my own much more modest way I find I've reached it myself – when the admiration of the young is more gratifyingly sweet to the soul, and more productive of that minimal confidence a poet needs to be able to work well, than all the plaudits of one's masters and contemporaries.

Here I find I am on tricky ground, because I and a few of my friends are the British poets in question. For this reason, when it was suggested to me that I speak on this topic today I at first flatly refused to do so, as I was sure my talking about such a subject could only seem self-serving. I was persuaded to do so however, as it was felt that a brief account of Edgar's connections with a younger generation of poets from across the Atlantic, and the apparently salutary effect that this had on his ability to write once again, might be of interest. Nevertheless I am still aware of the awkwardness of the situation, and I apologize for its unavoidable pushing of my own very minor role in Edgar's life into the foreground for a moment.

The poets in question are myself, Robert Wells, Clive Wilmer, and Michael Vince. All four of us went up to King's College, Cambridge in the 1960's, where we all read English under Tony Tanner, though Robert Wells started out by reading Classics. We became friends as undergraduates, or shortly after going down, and have remained friends since that time. Edgar has written poems about three of us: I am the subject of "On Dick Davis's Reading, California State University, Los Angeles", Clive is the subject of "On Clive Wilmer's Visit to the Wildfowl Refuge", Rob is the subject of "On

Robert Wells' Moving from Tours to Blois" and he also figures prominently in "How We Came from Paris to Blois".

It was Robert Wells who first drew my attention, and I'm pretty sure that of Clive Wilmer and Michael Vince, to Edgar's poems. He had found a selection of these in a couple of anthologies – Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (Penguin, 1962), and *Five American Poets*, edited by Gunn and Hughes (Faber in 1963), when only Edgar's first book, *The Form of Loss*, had appeared. After Robert Wells had graduated he worked for a while for Carcanet Press and it was he who persuaded the press's proprietor, Michael Schmidt, to issue the British edition of *Living Together*. It's therefore true to say that it was largely and primarily Rob's enthusiasm for Bowers' work that brought his poetry to the attention of his British readers. But I think it was I who ventured to make the first personal contact.

In 1975 my first book of poems was published, and after much deliberation I took the risk of sending a copy to Edgar, along with a fan letter in which I told him how much his poetry had meant to me. He answered me very diplomatically and cautiously, thanked me for my praise of his work, and said one or two nice things about one or two of my poems. Not wildly nice things, cautiously nice things, and not about many poems either: but as I soon learnt, praise from Edgar was very precious because it was very rare and therefore so much the more believable. When later on I sent him manuscript poems that I presume he didn't like he simply never mentioned them in his answers. And that of course was fine.

Edgar began to visit England I think in 1976, and I was living in Iran at that time, so I did not meet him on that visit, though both Clive and Rob did, and sent me very circumstantial accounts of the meeting. One phrase has stayed with me from Rob's letter: "I think Edgar is a man who never does anything he doesn't want to do". In a way that summed up one of the things that was so attractive about him – his total integrity, but it also pointed to another trait, one which mellowed as he grew older and we got to know him better – his determination not to be maneuvered into a position, any kind of a position, that he didn't want to be in. In his emotional life this determination sometimes failed him, but in his intellectual life, and usually in his social life, it almost never did. Edgar began to make fairly regular visits to England, usually during the summers, and after my return to England from Iran in late 1978, I was able to meet him whenever he came over. Usually he rented a house in Cambridge, where Clive lived and still lives, for his stay; on one memorable occasion he and his mother stayed with us for a few days in our very tiny and I'm afraid rather Spartan cottage in rural Norfolk, and they were both graciousness itself about what I later realized must have been a fairly physically cramped and uncomfortable visit for them.

He certainly more than returned any hospitality we were able to offer him: he arranged for me to teach for a quarter at UCSB, and later on for a year, and it was while I was there that I looked for a position in Persian, and finished up at Ohio State. Almost certainly, if I had not met Edgar, I would not be living in the US now. He also arranged for Clive to teach at UCSB for a quarter. Whether our friendship had an influence on his poetry or not is harder to say, but I think it did. Our affection and admiration for him, both of which were deep and genuine and lasted from those meetings in the late 1970's until his death, and our concern for his happiness and his welfare, seemed to mean a great deal to him, and to enable him to tap into parts of himself that he had perhaps previously

sealed off. I venture to suggest that the more personal, intimate and humane tone of many of his later poems comes in some small part from the trust and affection he eventually felt for us, as individuals and as a group. He felt able to open himself to us, and through that to open himself, and to make himself vulnerable to, some of the old and half buried experiences which formed the subject matter of many of his later poems.

One of the most briefly moving moments of my life I think was when Edgar read me “Adam”, the first poem in his sequence “Witnesses”, before the sequence was published, and after he had read the last lines he said something like - I forget the exact words, I think because I was so touched and taken aback – he said, “I guess Dick you know who’s meant there”. Those last lines are:

“Children I might have had, remember me,
That, in your quiet house, your word emerge”.

We shall always remember you Edgar, with more gratitude than can be said.