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Bowers' Later Blank Verse

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**“That You Might Have My Witness in Your Poem”:
Valéry, the Symbolist Tradition, and Bowers’ Later Blank Verse**

In her fine essay “Contexts for ‘Being,’ ‘Divinity,’ and ‘Self’ in Valéry and Edgar Bowers,” Helen P. Trimpi sees Valéry struggling against his idealist philosophical inheritance of neoplatonic essentialism.¹ She argues that in Valéry’s often neoplatonic universe, only pure intelligence has being and presence, and that what cannot be known is often viewed by the poet as not real. For Ms. Trimpi, Valéry, in reflecting on his pride, comes to the realization that he experiences the limitations imposed by worldly, temporal existence as a fatal and unacceptable absence of being. In a universe dominated by the experiencing subject’s desire to know and to control reality, that subject’s pride allows no room for degrees of incompletely or insufficiently understood “existence” (as opposed to “essence”) in the Thomistic sense. She then places the poetry of Edgar Bowers, who greatly admired Valéry, in the same philosophical context.

Many of Bowers’ poems written since the appearance of Ms. Trimpi’s essay in 1977 bear out the keen perceptiveness of her analysis. But even the term “existence” -- in the scholastic distinction between essence and existence -- is freighted with the language of ontology, of being. Bowers’ later poems often attempt to go beyond or outside the language of ontology and of representation. They employ, instead, the language of bearing witness.² In these poems, Bowers, who had published a sequence of poems entitled Witnesses in 1981,³ bears witness to the powerful presence of others, particularly those who exemplify a taming of pride and a selfless concern for others. In

¹ The Southern Review 13 (January 1977): 48-82.

² For the topic of poetry and witnessing, see Massimo Lollini, Il vuoto della forma: scrittura, testimonianza e verità (Genova: Marietti, 2001). See also, by the same author, “Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony” in Who, Exactly, is the Other? Western and Transcultural Perspectives, eds. Steven Shankman and Massimo Lollini (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 2002), pp. 23-31.

place of the tightly formal, often rhymed verse of The Form of Loss (1956) and The Astronomers (1965), Bowers' later poems are often composed in a supple and conversational blank verse. While the language is always elegant, the subjects of these poems are increasingly particularized and concrete, increasingly human, even mundane – a far cry from Valéry, who never completely cut his ties to the lofty and idealist symbolist tradition of his master, Mallarmé.

In the great early poem The Stoic: For Laura Von Courten (in The Form of Loss), the poet addresses the subject of the poem directly:

All winter long you listened for the boom
 Of distant cannon wheeled into their place.
 Sometimes outside beneath a bombers' moon
 You stood alone to watch the searchlights trace

Their careful webs against a boding sky,
 While miles away on Munich's vacant square
 The bombs lunged down with an unruly cry
 Whose blasts you saw yet could but faintly hear.

And might have turned your eyes upon the gleam
 Of a thousand years of snow, where near the clouds
 The Alps ride massive to their full extreme,
 And season after season glacier crowds

³ For a helpful guide in understanding these challenging poems, see Gordon Harvey, "Wrestling an Angel," Sequoia, Autumn 1983, pp. 83-89.

The dark, persistent smudge of conifers.
Or seen beyond the hedge and through the trees
The shadowy forms of cattle on the furze,
Their dim coats white with mist against the freeze.

Or thought instead of other times than these,
Of other countries and of other sights:
Eternal Venice sinking by degrees
Into the very water that she lights;

Reflected in canals, the lucid dome
Of Maria della Salute at your feet,
Her triple spires disfigured by the foam.
Remembered in Berlin the parks, the neat

Footpaths and lawns, the clean spring foliage,
Where just short weeks before, a bomb, unaimed,
Released a frightened lion from its cage,
Which in the mottled dark that trees enflamed

Killed one who hurried homeward from the raid.
And by yourself there standing in the chill

You must, with so much known, have been afraid
 And chosen such a mind of constant will,

Which, though all time corrode with constant hurt,
 Remains, until it occupies no space,
 That which it is; and, passionless, inert,
 Becomes at last no meaning and no place.⁴

This poem is dedicated to Laura Van Courten, but she is – admittedly, somewhat confusingly, for the reader – not herself the Stoic who is the subject of the poem. What we remember about The Stoic is not the person addressed in the poem in his or her unique particularity. Indeed, as I have just mentioned, the dedication has misled readers into assuming that the poem’s subject is treated with a particularity that it does not truly possess. The poem is a generalized portrait of a person who has steeled his or her psyche against the horrors of war. What we remember about the poem is not the portrait of the Stoic in his or her irreducible particularity, but rather the often bizarre and senseless horrors of war, such as the lion who escaped its cage as a result of the bombing, and then killed someone who had thought that the threat of mortal danger – unleashed by the Allied bombing – had at least temporarily dissipated. Or we remember the scenes to which the Stoic’s imagination turns in order to anaesthetize himself against unbearable terror, images such as that conveyed in the following unforgettable lines:

Eternal Venice sinking by degrees
 Into the very water that she lights.

⁴ Collected Poems (New York: Knopf, 1997), pp. 146-147. All citations from Bowers’ poetry will be from this edition.

Compare the representation of Bower's Stoic to the following vignette, also drawn from the poet's personal experience in Germany as a member of the Counter Intelligence Corps immediately following the war. In the late poem Clothes (included in the section "New Poems" [1997] in the Collected Poems), the poet narrates the speaker of the poem's discovery, as a young American soldier in Bavaria in 1946, of the body of a German woman who had been a clerk for the Gestapo and who has just poisoned herself:

Within the outer office, by the row
Of wooden chairs, one lying on its side,
On the discolored brown linoleum floor
Under a GI blanket was the lost
Unmoving shape; uncovered, from a fold,
A dirty foot half out of a dirty shoe,
Once white, heel bent, the sole worn through, the skin
Bruised red and calloused, uncut toenails curved
And veined like an old ivory. No one spoke.
Police stood at attention by a stretcher.
After an empty moment, suddenly
Bent over as if taken by a cramp,
I sobbed out loud and, on my uniform,
Vomited up my lunch – over the tie,
The polished buttons and insignia,
The little strips of color and the green
Eisenhower jacket with its Eagle patch,

The taut pants in a crease, the glistening jump-boots –
 Vomiting and still sobbing, like a child
 Awakened in the night, and sick.⁵

It is perhaps misleading to refer to this poem as an act of pure witnessing by the poet, for the poem's narrator is not Edgar Bowers but rather his fictional alter ego, John Isham (the "Mister Isham" of line 2 of the poem), the hero of Bowers' unfinished novel All Up and Down.⁶ The lines may well directly reflect the poet's own personal experience as a young soldier, but regardless of whether or not they are strictly autobiographical, they are, without a doubt, a powerful representation of an act of witnessing. According to Massimo Lollini, it is precisely "the urge to bear witness to the death of the other"⁷ that allowed Arthur Koestler, in his Dialogue with Death, to transcend his own ego in the direction of ethics and to become a witness in his writing. In the case of Koestler, that other was Koestler's friend Nicolás, with whom he had been imprisoned by the Fascist army during the Spanish Civil War and to whom he would later dedicate his book. In the case of the Bowers' poem Clothes, that other was the woman who had worked for the Gestapo, who has just committed suicide, and whose body the poem's narrator and chief protagonist has just discovered.

Many of Bowers' later poems, written almost exclusively in a more conversational blank verse, often focus on less extreme moments, and more on individuals going about their daily lives, such as Christian Bundy wandering around

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶ I am grateful to Timothy Steele for this insight as well as for informing me of Bowers' discussion, during an interview taped at the Sewanee Writers' Conference in 1999, of this device of narrating Clothes from the perspective of the fictional John Isham.

⁷ "Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony," Who, Exactly, is the Other? Western and Transcultural Perspectives, eds. Shankman and Lollini, p. 28.

Chaco Canyon in the poem of that name. On Dick Davis' Reading, California State University, Los Angeles; On Clive Wilmer's Visit to the Wildfowl Refuge; On Robert Wells' Moving from Tours to Blois: these are the titles of some of the poems collected in For Louis Pasteur (1989). Gone, for the most part in these poems, is the grandeur and taut brilliance of the earlier poetry, now sacrificed to the desire of the poet to bear witness especially to those who humbled their pride and who, in the case of Pasteur, used his speculative gifts to help others:

I like to think of Pasteur in Elysium
 Beneath the sunny pine of ripe Provence
 Tenderly raising black sheep, butterflies,
 Silkworms, and a new culture, for delight,
 Teaching his daughter to use a microscope
 And musing through a wonder – sacred passion,
 Practice and metaphysic all the same.
 And, each year, honor three births: Valéry,
 Humbling his pride by trying to write well,
 Mozart, who lives still, keeping my attention
 Repeatedly outside the reach of pride,
 And him whose mark I witness as a trust.
 Others he saves but could not save himself –
 Socrates, Galen, Hippocrates – the spirit
 Fastened by love upon the human cross.⁸

⁸ Collected Poems, pp. 42-43.

The section entitled New Poems (1997), included in the Collected Poems, published in that same year, begins with a poem called John, a moving portrait in blank verse of the poet-scholar-farmer John Finlay who had only recently died too young. The section New Poems ends, in How We Came from Paris to Blois, with a vignette featuring the poet Robert Wells, his wife Marie-Christine, and their daughter Constance. The poet's focus is on the mundane, the uniquely particular. At one point in the poem the poet is reminded of, and bears witness to, the young men in his division in the Second World War who lost their lives in a surprise attack in the Ardennes. The poet bears witness to

the brimming presences

Of voices, looks and stories, however brief,

Like none before, never to be again.

This final poem in New Poems ends with an "Afterward" in which the poet movingly imagines the events he describes in the poem to have been witnessed by the saintly poet, painter, and humanitarian Max Jacob. Jacob was a Jew who converted to Christianity in 1922 and who died in a concentration camp in 1944 (the "capitals" Jacob refers to in the lines that follow are the spaces at the tops of the columns, on display within the "tower porch" [l. 43] of the medieval church at Saint Benoit, that contain sculpted images of scenes from the Bible and from saints' lives):

Reading my poem, I seem to hear instead

Max Jacob's voice: "In twenty-two I came

To Saint Benoit from Paris, after Christ

Appeared to me above my own contrived

Hallucinations and the world's deliriums;
 And rose from out the round of pain and grief
 To step within his hand and learn the way
 Of being and of writing that suffices.

There on my body the German fixed the star
 That I must follow, as my Lord had done,
 King of himself but servant to the least
 Of all his brethren, even to death; and so,
 The little that I was or wrote or painted,
 Like those lives in the capitals you saw,
 Survives but for his witness. I tell you this
 That you might have my witness in your poem."

Bowers' fallen comrades at the Ardennes, those "friends and strangers I feared for as friends," are dead. The poet bears witness to their passing, and he bears witness, as well, to his more recently acquired friends, Robert Wells and his wife Marie-Christine who, during a stroll "by a young tree hung with ripening apples . . . held their child in the summer air"

To step from change and hope into my camera
 Before we started in the car to Blois. . .

The poem How We Came from Paris to Blois is a snapshot, a representation, and in that sense it freezes in time and thus betrays the irreducibly temporal particularity of the

events and persons the poet has witnessed. But the poet, who conceives of himself as a witness, is acutely aware of this necessary betrayal.

When Edgar Bowers turned seventy in 1994, I was asked to contribute to a volume in his honor. Aware of Edgar's love of the poetry of Paul Valéry, a love we shared, I thought it would be appropriate to write something that acknowledged this shared affection. I was aware also of Edgar's fondness for our mutual late friend, the great Pindar scholar Elroy Bundy, to whom Edgar bore witness at the beginning of his poem, On Robert Wells' Moving from Tours to Blois:

To honor the discovery of the soul,
 Roy Bundy and I sometimes played the game
 Of choosing what new psyche we would take
 Upward along the scale of transmigration.
 His preference was the Rocky Mountain sheep,
 True Pindarist, alert from rock to ledge
 And ledge to cliff face, the patrician balance,
 Heroic generosity and pride
 Watching us from a granite photograph
 By Phidias and Michelangelo.

I decided to translate Pindar's third Pythian ode, from which Valéry drew his epigraph for his great poem, Le cimetière marin. That epigraph reads: "Do not, dear soul, yearn for immortal life/ But rather make full use of each resource/ Firmly within your reach."⁹ Pindar's victory odes often come across in English translation as turgid and overblown. Enamored by the quiet elegance of Edgar's later blank verse, of its understated but

nevertheless continually present formal integrity and grace, of its ability to capture a variety of mundane experiences without falling into journalistic cliché and flatness, I decided to try to translate Pindar into a blank verse influenced by Edgar's own.

I conclude by quoting the lines that end my translation of Pindar's Pythians 3, dedicated to Edgar Bowers on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, lines that bear witness, however insufficiently, to Edgar's example as a practitioner of blank verse, as well as to the shared affections I mentioned a few moments ago:

I shall be small in small times, great in great ones.

I lovingly shall honor with devotion

The spirit who directs my present fortunes

And I shall make full use of each resource

Firmly within my reach. If God sends wealth,

Then lofty fame may also grace my future.

Nestor and Lykian Sarpedon live

Through famous poems fashioned by skilled craftsmen.

Virtue endures through fabled song, a task

Accomplished with much ease by very few.¹⁰

⁹My own translation, from Kindred Verses (Edgewood, Kentucky: Robert L. Barth, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 6-7.