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'PUNISHED HAPPINESS':

Themes of change and loss in "Amor Vincit Omnia" and "The Falls."

(A paper presented by Leslie Monsour)

Samuel Butler wrote in his Notebooks: "I do not like having to try to make myself like things; I like things that make me like them at once and no trying at all." That was the case with Edgar Bowers's poem, "*Amor Vincit Omnia*." I liked it at once, with no trying, for the lyric grace of its stanzas and the complex nature of its gravity.

***Amor Vincit Omnia***

Love is no more.

It died as the mind dies: the pure desire

Relinquishing the blissful form it wore,

The ample joy and clarity expire.

Regret is vain.

Then do not grieve for what you would efface,

The sudden failure of the past, the pain

Of its unwilling change, and the disgrace.

Leave innocence,

And modify your nature by the grief

Which poses to the will indifference

That no desire is permanent in sense.

Take leave of me.

What recompense, or pity, or deceit

Can cure, or what assumed serenity

Conceal the mortal loss which we repeat?

The mind will change, and change shall be relief.

The title's quotation can be traced to Vergil's "*Omnia vincit Amor*," from the Eclogues. The irony and pessimism of the Bowers title is in the spirit of Vergil's melancholy undertone in the Eclogues, a pastoral poem in which shepherds, or young men, converse. When Vergil writes, "*Omnia vincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori*" -- "Love conquers all things: let us too give in to Love" -- the power of love does not seem altogether benign or harmless. The very word, "conquer," is not free of violent implications.

According to Joshua Odell's and Jeffrey Ackard's bibliography, "*Amor Vincit Omnia*" was composed in December, 1952, in Durham, North Carolina, when Edgar was a 28 year-old English professor at Duke. It appears in his first book, The Form of Loss, published in 1956. "The form of loss" is a phrase lifted from another early poem, "The Prince," which follows "*Amor Vincit Omnia*" in the book. It seems, indeed, that loss is the major theme throughout Bowers's first book, in particular, I believe, certain aspects of the loss of innocence, the mind relinquishing "the blissful form it wore." Innocence is mentioned at least nine times in the twenty-six poems that comprise The Form of Loss. In "The Prince," the eyes of a dying fox "Glitter with Epicurus's innocence." It's a significant line, because I believe there are Epicurian ideas of change and death in "*Amor Vincit Omnia*." Perhaps Bowers regarded the Epicurian philosophy itself as a form of innocence.

Epicurus taught that dying and changing are the same activity, that everything is made of immortal atoms which can never be destroyed, only rearranged. Even dreams, emotions, thoughts, and the human soul are made of atoms, which disperse at death, and form new entities. Lucretius, the poet/philosopher who kept Epicurean ideas alive in Roman Latin, wrote in The Nature of Things that death and change are commutually related:

...nature breaks up all things

into their atoms; no thing dies off to nothing,...

...For whatever changes and leaves its natural bounds

is instant death of that which was before.

These concepts must have seemed idealistic and innocent to Bowers, evidenced by the way he treats the subject of change. As "*Amor Vincit Omnia*" proceeds, change occurs with painful unwillingness, resulting in failure and disgrace.

By the fourth stanza, innocence turns into cynicism, with the introduction of a new emotional element, "deceit." Bowers rhymes "deceit" with "repeat," a sign he is

aware of how the mind uses deceit as a narcotic to numb its repeated wounds. Seemingly, Bowers struggled with this awareness all his life. He copied into his notebooks a version of J.V. Cunningham's poem, "Retreating Friendship:"

In earlier days we said:

Affection is secure;

It is not forced or led.

No longer sure

Of hallowed certainty

I have erased the mind,

As mendicants that see

Mimic the blind.

"*Amor Vincit Omnia*" is written in four handsomely carved quatrains, which "sit ceremonious like tombs," to borrow Emily Dickinson's phrase. These are underscored by the final seventeenth line, serving as a worldly force, in which the innocent mind that died at the beginning of the poem is revived to cope with the realities of experience.

The rhyme scheme is abab, alternating throughout, with the notable exception of the third stanza, where three lines rhyme with "innocence," while the second line, ending in "grief," has no rhyme. Bowers leaves "grief" suspended in solitude, emphasizing the personal and isolating nature of loss. It isn't until the underscoring last line that the rhyme for "grief" is found in "relief." That resounding line also stands apart, separated from the body of the poem, alone without a stanza, like the moral to a fable. It could almost be construed as an immense solace, but it is highly ambiguous, in my opinion. It's a breed of cynical optimism. "The mind will change, and change shall be relief," implies that relief will come in the form of new love. In other words, "*Amor Novus Vincit Omnia*."

A notebook entry Bowers made in the 1990's, after he'd retired from teaching and moved to San Francisco, indicates he was still coming to terms with this question (and here, I'd like to pause and thank Kevin Durkin for the pertinent tidbits he shared with me from the Bowers archive). Bowers wrote:

"The radical dream is that, no matter the loss, an alternative will present itself. If a lover fails, there is always another lover. But the fact is that such alternatives are few...Profound commitment to another is a recognition by the psyche that this is so...Love is rooted in pessimism. The optimistic do not love, for they always count on another."

“The Falls” is one of fourteen poems in a group under the heading “Mazes,” which were written roughly forty years after the poems in The Form of Loss. The heading, “Mazes,” suggests structures of complex or tortuous design, full of blind alleys. Bowers avoids the blind alleys by using the thread of memory, as Theseus did. He has carried this thread with him over the four decades that have elapsed between “The Falls” and “Amor Vincit Omnia.”

### **The Falls**

What distances we travel! From Vancouver  
Out of a window five miles high, I saw  
Climates and weathers, tundra, mountain, snowfield,  
Sea and horizon, the towers of Calgary  
Reflecting, in their glass, prairie and cloud.  
We drove along a river green with flour  
Milled by live glaciers from the crust, the car  
Powered by the blood of dragons. At night fall,  
A full moon told the bond of space and time,  
That infinite, invest us with desire,  
And, perfect, are indifferent to its wish.

(stanza break)

It was a poet's moon. I thought of you --  
Two continents and forty years apart --  
In sunlight, on your after-school vacation,  
The village church for pilgrims on their way,

The passages of change that has no stop,  
And thought the thought that Shakespeare thought a death;  
But knew the charm for a temptation, when,  
The next day, we came to the falls, a psyche  
Manic from rock to rock and bank to bank,  
Furious from the snow-cloud and the snow,  
Running, as if all broken sound and mist,  
Tormented to its punished happiness.

I'm convinced that the last four lines are among the finest in all of literature about the state of rushing water. The initial trochees, "Manic," "Furious," and "Running," surrender fluently to the iambic "Tormented" in the last line. And who can ever think of a waterfall again without thinking of the words, "punished happiness"?

Desire is disarmed by its antonym, indifference, in this poem, just as it was in "*Amor Vincit Omnia*." In "The Falls," the full moon illuminates "the bond of space and time,/That, infinite, invest us with desire,/ And perfect, are indifferent to its wish."

Bowers never mentions the moon casually. In this case it's "a poet's moon." It stirs memory with its reflected light, the sunlight of an "after school vacation." While the sun stands for constancy, the moon represents inconstancy and cold indifference, uniting change and death into one process, as Epicurus and Lucretius did.

Bowers inserts a detail of learning in the middle of the second stanza with the line, "And thought the thought that Shakespeare thought a death." He is referring to Sonnet 64, "When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced," whose lines make a fit anthem for the subject of change and loss. Shakespeare ends the sonnet,

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat,

That Time will come and take my love away.

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose

But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

The pursuit of what is feared will be lost, what Bowers calls, “That charm for a temptation,” turns the rushing water into a “manic psyche” that runs “from rock to rock and bank to bank.” Here Bowers is paying homage to a sonnet by the 16th century Scottish poet, Mark Alexander Boyd, a poem which also deals with the futility of chasing after the object of erotic obsession. Edgar was undoubtedly exposed to Boyd’s sonnet as a student of Yvor Winters, who called the poem, “one of the most extraordinary poems in our language,” and always pointed it out to his students. Bowers’s line, “Manic from rock to rock and bank to bank,” echoes Boyd’s opening lines,

Fra bank ta bank, fra wood ta wood I rin

Ourhailit wi’ my feeble fantasie...

The essence of Vergil’s Ecloques is also present. Vergil wrote, “Everyone is dragged on by his favourite pleasure,” and, “How an awful madness swept me away!...Now I know what Love is.”

I can’t help but see a resemblance here, too, in the last lines of E.A. Robinson’s “*Eros Turannos*,” whose Latin title, “Love, the Tyrant,” is not very far removed from “Love Conquers All,” or “*Amor Vincit Omnia*.” Robinson’s poem ends:

Though like waves breaking it may be,



Or like a changed familiar tree,

Or like a stairway to the sea

Where down the blind are driven.

Montaigne, in his essay, "On affectionate relationships," writes, "sexual love is but a mad craving for something which escapes us...Difficulty increases desire." In another essay, entitled, "We can savour nothing pure," Montaigne begins, "Of the pleasures and goods we enjoy, not one is exempt from being compounded with some evil and injury." He quotes Lucretius: "from the very fount of our delights there surges something bitter which gives us distress..." Montaigne goes on, "The greatest of our pleasures has an air of groaning and lamentation...Deep joy has more gravity than gaiety...That is what is meant by that line of ancient Greek poetry: 'The gods sell us all the pleasures which they give us'; that is to say, none that they give us is pure and perfect: we can only buy them at the price of some suffering."

This classic struggle is at the heart of these poems, and, most likely, at the heart of Edgar Bowers. Auden wrote, "Happiness comes in absorption." The dignity of learning and eloquent imagination that fulfill Bowers's work lead me to believe that, if Auden was right, Edgar certainly must have savored untold hours of pure, rewarding, unpunished happiness, fully absorbed in the masterly pursuit of his work.