

UCLA Library

Charles E. Young Research
Library Department of Special
Collections
(University of California, Los Angeles)

Year 2003

Paper 036

How Shall a Generation Know Its Story: The Edgar
Bowers Conference and Exhibition April 11, 2003
Introduction to Poetry

Joshua Mehigan

How Shall a Generation Know Its Story: The Edgar Bowers Conference & Exhibition
April 11, 2003, UCLA

“Introduction to Poetry”

by Joshua Mehigan

From July 1999 to February 2000, I shared a brief but, for me, uniquely gratifying friendship with Edgar Bowers. One of the regular dividends of that friendship was the correspondence I received, all written in a voluble, generous, highly individualized prose that was a corollary of the warm, large-minded man who composed it.

I first wrote Edgar at the encouragement of Dick Davis, whom I'd written a fan letter only a month earlier. I knew nothing of Dick's friendship with Edgar, but quickly learned, when I declared Edgar Bowers among my favorite living poets. Dick suggested I write and tell Edgar, as I'd told him, of my admiration for Edgar's poems.

I was elated, and also terrified. In 1997 I'd rather arbitrarily discovered Edgar's poems. But over the next two years, I'd found in them a personal and aesthetic appeal alien to me with respect to the work of living writers. The poems I first grasped—“An Afternoon at the Beach,” “Defense of Poetry,” “Autumn Shade,” “For Louis Pasteur”—displayed stunning technique and emotional depth, an original and quietly daring intellect, and a restrained, humanistic sensibility both erudite and progressive in the sense that physics is progressive. I already thought of Edgar Bowers as existing in history. Suddenly, I had his e-mail address. My self-conscious first letter hedged against gaps in literary knowledge by mentioning my dearth of formal literary education. I explained that I'd gotten a BA in philosophy and, in poetry, only the dubious MFA. Next day, July 4, 1999, I received this response.

Dear Mr. Mehigan, I have been wondering where you might have studied philosophy and what your curriculum consisted of, partly because, since my retirement and move to San Francisco from Santa Barbara, I have been sitting in on philosophy classes at the University of San Francisco, a little Jesuit school on, of course, a hill, partly because I missed young people and partly because I had never had a course in philosophy and wanted to make up for the omission. . . . Last term I was in a class on David Hume that was not at all Jesuit but wonderfully taught by a young man from Harvard and U Mass, a class that was very exciting to me, for, among other things, I thought to perceive in Hume's despair of reason many of the sources of the world of rhetoric and purposeless iconoclasm that seems general, and the accompanying evaluation of emotion over intelligence (intelligence by now reduced to a very feeble state, not the *nous* of Aristotle) there being no public truth to appeal to. Amusingly enough, when I was in Rome later in the spring, I thought to find quite Humean the propagandistic practices of the Augustan empire and its imitation by the early Jesuits. You see to what undisciplined speculation being an amateur philosopher can lead.

I hadn't thought much of Hume in ten years. Yet I knew intimately “the world of rhetoric and purposeless iconoclasm.” Cynical as it sounds, it served us as a first connection. My new job at Poets & Writers epitomized and glorified this world, whose dominance Edgar well understood.

He commiserated:

Dear Mr. Mehigan, I don't know much about Poets and Writers (though one doesn't have to know much to find the name amusing) . . .

And on the related subject of the MFA (“art,” as Edgar wrote, “being the ironic word”):

I think they should all be abolished lest they undermine finally the “fine arts” they pretend to foster but which they probably cannot even define. Several years ago, I was poet in residence at UNC Greensboro and was quite astonished to discover the ignorance and inevitable self-assurance of the students (all subsidized) and the cynicism of the entire enterprise. And, thinking that there must be hundreds of such programs, wondered what had or would become of the idea that writing well should be the end of the writer. But I remind myself that John Cleveland was the most famous and popular poet when Marvell and Milton were writing, though he is at least fun to read sometimes as a perversity of a style, there being at least a style.

While Edgar’s formal prose kept us on polite terms, our shared frustration afforded easy ground for unqualified discussion. But it would be wrong to portray Edgar as a severe correspondent. His penchant for urbanity thrilled me, and, after one or two more messages, the tone relaxed. It strikes me now what an effort he made to treat me as an equal, how often he asked my opinion—something few poet-professors had done—and how patiently he brooked my many questions.

In his second message to me, Edgar ended with a recommendation of Bridges’s Nero plays. I capitalized on the recommendation, hoping for some general comments about blank verse.

Dear Joshua, . . . I think Wallace Stevens early blank verse one of the great joys of the form, but he lost interest in writing and became a philosopher, I’m afraid. The subject of “Birches” has never interested me very much, but Frost, when he is not self-indulgent or whimsical, which he often *is*, knows how writing should be done. . . . The first blank verse I was conscious of was Tennyson’s: we had to memorize some of “Ulysses” in the second year of high school. I can still recite it. I guess the thing I like best about b[lack] v[erse] is that it is so hard!!!

On July 19, he continued:

. . . I have never cared for “Ideas of Order,” which seems hollow somehow, and which lacks the marvelous sensitivity of the earlier verse. . . . Browning is always enjoyable to read, I think, but, in order to get away from the beautiful subject in the beautiful style, gets eccentric and in his own stereotype. I am one of the few people I know who admires *The Ring and the Book* and find it instructive to compare it with Pound’s *Cantos* for learning, intelligence, breadth of reference, etc. . . . Robinson is someone else who left the beautiful subject and style (“poetry”); do you like his dramatic monologues? . . . one wishes there were something a little less plodding about much of EAR’S versification. It is hard not to be caught by surface, since that’s what comes first. I probably thought of him as a precedent when writing my poems about particular persons.

Blank verse was a favorite subject. At the Sewanee Writers’ Conference, where Edgar read that July, we discussed the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* (“the au-da-city of that poem!”) and of *King Lear*, which we both liked best of Shakespeare’s works. In a conversation at dusk on a mountain path, we did our best to cover its history from Surrey, in an hour.

We also talked over the *Odyssey*, and Fagels's translation of it, which Edgar had brought for reading. I'd begun trying some translation, and often discussed the subject by e-mail with Dick. It became a conversation with Edgar, as well. On August 28, he wrote:

Fagels's translation is a kind of prose that recalls the iambic and often is . . . verse line by line. I do not know much Greek beyond the alphabet and some words, but judge translations on how convincing they are as English, until a scholar shows that the translator does not really understand the language he is translating from (then one can still enjoy it, I suppose, but not call it a translation, just a well done fake, so not enjoy it as much). I assume we all do that pretty much. Robert Wells runs into the problem of literalist classicists who couldn't write a decent English sentence or recognize one, but who huff and puff because Robert chooses one possible choice from the several that the Greek word can mean, whereas the professional prefers another and therefore denigrates his wonderfully written translations of Theocritus.

Now, I did, and do, read into some of Edgar's poems the possibility of their having begun as translations of certain French poets. The obvious question, for me, was whether or not Edgar had any unpublished translations lying around.

Dear Josh, I have never finished a translation! I always seemed to shift to a poem of my own. I tried Baudelaire (and spent great effort on "Le Jeu," and like parts of it but never could get the first two stanzas to please me; I kept wanting to improve his stanzas, my usual problem in translation!): and used to try Heredia, but just stole his centaur, etc. Charles Gullans and Bob Mezey had hardly to look at the original than to come up with a fine English version. Mezey has been doing that with Borges, some of whose poems seem very good (my Spanish being rudimentary). I guess I'm too self-centered! I'm glad to hear that you are interested in Italian. . . . What are you interested in reading? Dick and a friend and I read Dante together the year he lived in Santa Barbara. They read the Italian aloud and then we read and compared various translations. How I miss Dick and activities like that. Robert Wells and I read Tasso! Sometimes I think I shouldn't have been so lazy about writing poems if I had had such good-spirited, intelligent, and literate friends to share time with in such a way more often. Affectionately, as ever, Edgar

In those final remarks, it pleases me as well to note a capsule illustration of the value Edgar placed upon the cultivation of his friendships. It's a virtue that left a large impression on me.

Our correspondence continued into fall. I asked Edgar's opinion of Keats, and of Hopkins and Arnold, whom I'd been re-reading for a class. I wrote to him of a passage in *Endymion* whose movement interested me, and, perhaps hopeful, Edgar went out to the Green Apple Book Store and bought a selected Keats, as he'd given all his books to libraries. On Keats:

. . . my first impression is of dilation and amplification both, and that most of the work seems over-written and in a language that seems almost entirely aesthetically motivated, the "subject" somewhat [at a] distance, if that makes sense, and therefore not quite a language, though I find it hard not to anticipate what this language is to become later in the century. Therefore the "better language" will likely be in the less "serious" poems. I had trouble getting into *Endymion* and had forgot that you specified passages; so I shall have a look at them. What do you think of my "impressions"? What do you find that you like? . . . In any

case, I am enjoying understanding my reactions and trying to characterize for myself his practice. His life makes one want to like him, of course, which, of course, it should not.

And on Hopkins and Arnold:

I think Hopkins is enjoyable to read, more so than Arnold, for example, except “Dover Beach,” maybe. Fifty years ago he was considered a great poet, but that interest seems to have quieted down. Maybe it was the violence that suited critical assumptions fifty years ago. I do not really know what the assumptions are nowadays, though probably in favor of plain speaking. Hopkins is limited, though, by this eccentricity? Maybe he didn’t like the Georgians, who must have seemed bland to him. What do you think? Good to hear from you and hope to hear more.

Perhaps the most interesting literary insights I gleaned from Edgar concerned his own poems. Once comfortable, I must’ve slipped into each message at least one specific question about a poem or technique. The following comments, though originally scattered, seem of a piece to me.

(November 13) Dear Josh, It was nice . . . to know that you like “Autumn Shade,” my “break-through” blank verse effort. Robert [Wells] particularly likes “If I ask you, angel” (for the rhythm) and wants a copy in my illegible script. Have you seen Michael Schmidt’s huge new book *The Lives of the Poets*? He says I am a “radical traditionalist,” which seems oxymoronic but I take as a compliment.

I said that about “Autumn Shade” because my only previous blank verse effort, “The Prince” was truly an effort; it wasn’t instinctive yet. I planned “A[utumn] S[hade]”’s verse, thought what to do with lines, accents (as opposed to stresses), caesuras, run-overs, figures of repetition, syntax, etc. and think that what I learned made possible my later verse, as in “Louis Pasteur,” extending range, ready for anything, etc.

(November 29) The blank verse of “The Prince” is suitable for the tragic occasion, I think, but does not have the quiet flexibility and receptiveness of particulars that I was looking for in “Autumn Shade” and that opened up for me the sort of subjects and means of the poems in *Pasteur*, poems in which the movement and tone are not “serious” in themselves but neutral to the matter, if that makes sense to you. Though there can be rising moments of rhythm, like “Each summer on the grass behind the house” in “Mary.” I probably actually worked harder at writing “The Prince,” for I still felt that blank verse was a twisting of iron bars; for “A[utumn] S[hade],” as I think I said, I planned ahead what I was going to do in terms of the formal elements and then more or less did as I’d planned, though, of course, “refining” my plan as I went along, till I didn’t think about it any longer, feeling that It and my Best Self (sometimes called “inspiration”) were united. There’s lots more to be said on That Subject, I’m sure, but my notions are pretty sketchy. As you can probably tell, thinking in blank verse became a natural thing for me, so natural I don’t seem to think any other way!

(December 15) I learned a lot, I think, from Shakespeare’s freer blank verse, though I wanted mine quieter. Let the tale speak for itself, so to speak, and let the neutral tone be ironic, I guess, as in the poem “Mary,” when more feeling might seem to be called for.

In the message dated December 15, Edgar also discussed plans for a January trip east. That was the last e-mail I received from him. The abruptness of his absence, and our somewhat impersonal medium of e-mail, made it too easy to imagine I’d simply had a familiar living in my hard drive. It is an understatement to say I wish I’d known him longer.

Even so, I often find myself astonished and deeply grateful for the happy Aristotelian activity, however brief, of a friendship with Edgar—always an end in itself.