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

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0fb2s4kf>

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Publication Date

2003-04-11

**REMEMBERING EDGAR BOWERS: THE YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP WITH
ELROY L. BUNDY, 1967-1975**

by Barbara Bundy

Presented on April 11, 2003 at the UCLA Edgar Bowers Conference and Exhibition,
“How Shall a Generation Know Its Story?”

I first met Edgar Bowers in 1969 in Berkeley where my late husband, Elroy Bundy, and I were living and teaching at the University of California, Roy in classics and comparative literature and I in Russian and comparative literature. Edgar was on sabbatical from UC Santa Barbara and had rented a house in Berkeley with his partner and life-long friend, James Davis. James was on a leave of absence as head of the undergraduate library here at UCLA in order to help UC Berkeley prepare the opening of the Moffitt Undergraduate Library. Roy and I had been married a little over a year at the time. Roy had first met Edgar a year and a half earlier and they had stayed in touch. And so it came to pass that we invited Edgar and James to lunch at our home one sunny afternoon. The occasion marked the beginning of a deep friendship among the four of us—for myself, an irreplaceable relationship that lasted for 31 years until Edgar’s and James’ deaths in February 2000 and for Roy, a profound friendship that, brief as it was (Roy died suddenly in 1975), developed at a critical juncture in his life and made all the difference in the world to him—and I think also to Edgar.

In the brief time that I have, I would like to share some memories, primarily of the friendship between Edgar and Roy. After Roy’s death Edgar continued to be my loyal friend and mentor and a loving Godfather to Roy’s and my son, Christian Edward Bundy. Roy Bundy met Edgar in an adverse hour of his life. Roy often said, looking back on the transformation that his life underwent at that time, that he couldn’t imagine the project of reconstructing his life as he struggled to recover from debilitating alcoholism without having known Edgar and two other remarkable individuals here today who became dearest friends, namely Helen Pinkerton Trimpi and Wesley Trimpi. Let me tell you

about the circumstances of how Edgar and Roy first met, an encounter which became the basis of their friendship.

It was the summer of 1967. Roy was 47 at the time and had recently embarked on the long path of recovery from alcoholism, a disease that had afflicted him since his early 30s and which had reached acute proportions in late 1966 when he made courageous existential choice, as he used to put it, “to be rather than not to be,” and to join Alcoholics Anonymous. During his darkest period Roy wrote and published in 1962-63 the two seminal works on which his reputation as perhaps the most important scholar of Pindar in the 20th century rests, namely the *Studia Pindarica I* and *II*. As many of you know, these two slender volumes revolutionized the way Pindar and other Greeks are read today and created a new school of thought about Greek poetry.

Plagued by guilt and the inevitable depression that came with his new resolve and consciousness, Roy embarked on an ambitious program of reading in western and related thought in the attempt to find his own personal truth and to understand more truly the intellectual and cultural forces that led him to take the path he did. Two of the books that were critical to him in re-thinking his ideas about canon-making and modern poetry were Yvor Winters’ *In Defense of Reason* and *Forms of Discovery*. He began reading the poets and poems Winters recommends in these books and that was how he came, for the first time, to read *The Form of Loss* and *The Astronomers of Mont Blanc*, the two books of poems Edgar Bowers had published at that time. He wanted to meet Edgar Bowers.

Severely depressed and questioning whether, by grace or grit, he had the strength and emotional resources to continue with his life, Roy made a solo trip to southern California that summer of 1967 to visit his sister and then on to Minnesota to visit his birthplace, Fergus Falls, and Duluth, where he had grown up, poor and Mormon, in the 20s and 30s. He stopped in Santa Barbara to visit a former student teaching then in the Classics Department. As it turned out, Alva Bennett knew Edgar and introduced the two of them.

I imagine Edgar and Roy as they must have sat that June afternoon in the living room of Edgar's charming beach house, the panoramic window open to the steady rush of the sea and the brilliant light on a good day, talking about mutual literary interests and Roy's urgent quest for reality that had led him to become seriously interested in Winters' work and in the school of writers who flourished under the influence of his teaching and writing. And I say to myself, what more perfect person than Edgar Bowers for Roy Bundy to have met at that particular point in his life. Edgar, who was intimate with the strangeness of existence and the mysterious forces of being that bring us to fullness and emptiness; Edgar, whom I remember as always welcoming of strangers, perhaps because he was so familiar with the ultimate stranger within. I recall Edgar saying to me many years later that he had "liked Roy at once" and Roy telling me that his encounter with Edgar marked the beginning of his journey back to the life of the mind.

Little could either Roy or Edgar imagine at that first meeting that years up the ladder in time—20 years after Roy's passing—that Edgar would take Roy's son, his then 12 year-old Godson Christian, on an incredible journey to Chaco Canyon, which would provide the subject matter for his strangely haunting poem of same name, "Chaco Canyon." Perhaps reflective of the familiarity Edgar came to have with Pindar's odes through his conversations with Roy, the "Chaco Canyon" poem is rich in imagery and references to the Greek world and contains very clear elements of the rhetorical structure used by Pindar.

In any event, Roy Bundy emerged from his journey "to put ghosts to rest" that summer with a remarkable new friend and colleague in Edgar Bowers, and with a renewed sense of himself—a feeling that he could overcome the intense depression and guilt he experienced from years of self-deception and misspent desire and once again engage with the tangible world and his own scholarly work. Clearly, meeting Edgar was a life-altering experience. Roy and I married that next year, in January 1968.

During Edgar's and James Davis' "Berkeley year" in 1969 Roy and Edgar were together often, and their friendship deepened. I remember so vividly the animated times that Roy, Edgar, James, and Helen and Wes Trimpi and I spent together—gathered round the Trimpis' hospitable hearth for grand Christmas celebrations; at our favorite Omei Restaurant where Edgar loved to feast on their tripe prepared Szechuan style; at parties at Edgar's and James' place; and on trips to the San Francisco museums which always inspired rich contemplation and conversation. In the years following Edgar's return to Santa Barbara and until Roy's untimely death from a heart attack at age 55 in 1975, Edgar and Roy and I shared many a memorable time together, both in Santa Barbara and in the Bay Area.

Edgar and Roy shared much in common, above all a rare and uncanny ability to read a literary text for its intention as revealed in the language and form of a work so that they each arrived at an understanding of a text that seemed to their literary peers very close to what must have been the spirit in which it was written. Both possessed this ability to a degree uncommon in anyone else I have known. Edgar's and Roy's insights into literature were in large part original, just as the individuals themselves were one of a kind in a really quite extraordinary way.

I would like to conclude this remembering of Edgar Bowers and Roy Bundy and their friendship by recalling the trip to Greece that we three friends took in late spring 1973, the year in which *Living Together* was published. For Edgar this was his first trip to the land of the gods and the wine-dark sea; for Roy it was the second; and for me, the third. For all three of us the journey was a life-altering encounter with the Other. We traveled to Athens, the Peloponnese, to Pindar's island, Aegina, and to Crete and Rhodes. When we would arrive at the ruins of an ancient site—I remember our visit to Mycenae especially in this context—we would play a game, initiated by Edgar of course. Edgar's persona speaks of this game in his poem first published in *For Louis Pasteur*, "On Robert Wells'

Moving from Tour to Blois.” This poem provides a playful yet serious characterization of how Edgar--the sometimes eagle, sometimes anaconda--perceived Roy and his friendship with Roy, the Rocky Mountain sheep:

“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 never could decide between the eagle
In skies above Tiepolo’s delights,
Pieties, and grave, airy enthusiasm,
And, grown wise in the trees of good and evil,
Its blood a liquid sunshine, menacing
The monkeys of Douanier Rousseau,
The anaconda.....”

Edgar then names the salamander as the soul that “chose” Robert and Marie Wells by virtue of their decision to move to Blois. He qualifies the salamander as “the Pythian flame,” connecting Robert’s and Marie’s journey of the soul to Pindar’s, Roy Bundy’s, and his own. I mention this poem because it is a good example in its structure, rhetorical conventions, and imagery of the impact on Edgar’s later poems of Pindar’s heroic vision and his use of rhetorical convention in structuring his victory odes. This poem is a tribute

not only to Edgar's good friends Robert and Marie Wells, but also to Roy Bundy and his friendship with Roy.

One of the most magical moments I recall was when Roy, Edgar, and I stood atop the hill overlooking the ruins of Mycenae, where once a great civilization flourished, trying to puzzle out the floor plan of what must have been. Edgar, the would-be eagle-anaconda and warm, responsive, vibrant soul that he was, immediately leapt in his mind's eye across time and culture and started the game we played so often with an enthusiastic invitation to Roy and myself: "Let's imagine Mycenae." And so we did, walking down the spring-green slope, imagining the Other, deconstructing and reconstructing Mycenae with Roy providing very helpful facts and theories about the social history of Mycenaean civilization.

Our Grecian spring brought its dark moments, however. We were on Rhodes, our last port of call before returning home. I don't know if it was being surrounded by the extremes of beauty, restraint, and harmony in Greek art over against a heightened awareness of the forces pervasive in Greek culture that at any moment threatened chaos and the undoing of the human psyche; or perhaps it was the fact that Edgar and I could enjoy a glass of wine or martini before dinner, something Roy's own hard-won limitations could not permit, but a Faustian longing overtook Roy Bundy—that old, familiar passion for the absolute and the ongoing urge to possess it all in a given, mortal moment—and his life as he'd known it since beginning his recovery unraveled. All Roy said to us was that alcohol was "an exclusion I can no longer afford." And so he began to drink again.

Roy was able to contain his drinking for the remainder of the trip, but when we arrived back at Stanford, where he was a visiting professor, his former addiction took hold. It was a brief, painful, and important interlude. Fortunately, Roy was able to renew his promise to himself and, as he put it, "to somewhere a God", to give up alcohol once

again and to accept his hard-won boundaries in this regard. I mention this incident because it was after this turning point and the trip to Greece with Edgar that Roy arrived at a more tranquil acceptance of himself and a deeper appreciation of the real gifts that were uniquely his own.

Years later, many years after Roy's passing and after Edgar's own bout with alcoholism in the 80s, after Edgar had retired from the University of California, left Miramar Beach, and had moved to a marvelously light and airy apartment with great views on Russian Hill in San Francisco, he and I sat on his sofa with the brilliant yellow slipcovers he took such pleasure in, looked out at the Golden Gate Bridge, the bay, the sailboats, and talked about what we thought, in retrospect, had 'happened' on our trip to Greece that prompted Roy to drink again. It was the only time Edgar ever spoke with me about his own alcoholism, which became a further bond between him and his memory of Roy and their friendship.

Edgar spoke of his own particular loneliness in Santa Barbara (which became more intense during the 80s), as a single person and a homosexual in what was then a still closeted, prejudiced, and often inhumane society. He told me he became depressed and would sit for extended periods of time in his beach house, immobilized, as if inert. He began to drink more than just socially until finally, he said, the force that had seemed so strange to him that fateful day in Rhodes in 1973 began to overtake him as the addictive powers of alcohol replaced his will. Like Roy, Edgar turned to Alcoholics Anonymous, and also began counseling with a psychologist who later became one of his dear and trusted friends.

A final comment on the friendship between Edgar and Roy. I have long been aware of the great extent to which Edgar—the man and his work—influenced Roy, for I experienced Edgar in those early years largely through Roy and his friendship with Edgar. It is only in preparing this reminiscence and in re-reading Edgar's *Collected*

Poems, Roy's *Studia Pindarica*, and Pindar's odes that I have become aware of the significant extent to which Roy, and through Roy, Pindar, influenced Edgar's later work. In several of the longer poems we can discern a kind of Pindaric intentionality in Edgar's praising, celebrating, or mourning friends, family members, or a figure of historical importance, or individuals whom Edgar knew personally and admired. Like Pindar, Edgar locates the objects of his meditation and praise in particular places, times, and circumstances and then universalizes their significance through classical and other past references, often concluding with an appeal to the future, linking past, present, and future to "future pasts" as he does in "Wandering."

Some final reflections about Edgar. A benchmark in Edgar's recovery from depression and alcoholism in the late 80s was his decision to retire and to move to San Francisco following the death of his beloved mother, Grace Andersen Bowers, at the age of 100 in 1990. In San Francisco he discovered new communities and the company of many close friends; and there he made many new friends, young and old. One sensed in him a greater openness to his own vulnerability and to that of others. Edgar took great satisfaction, for example, in volunteering at the Family House as a tutor to young, unwed African American teenage girls who were pregnant or single parents, and in volunteering his time to support several nonprofit organizations dedicated to equal rights for gays and lesbians. And it was during this last decade of his life that he wrote some of his most eloquent and enduring poems. I mention Edgar's struggles because in the midst of our praising his radiant achievements and accomplishments, Edgar would not want us and other 'witnesses' and 'children of his dream' ever to forget that he, too, experienced the mysterious and dark forces of being human in adverse ways and that reason and an enthusiasm for living a civilized life prevailed in him and in his poems not in spite of these forces, but because of them.

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