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AUTUMN SHADE : THE ART OF THE SEQUENCE

The Modern Poetic Sequence – what is that? If we consult the major scholarly work of this title by M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, the answer seems to be: What you will. For 500 pages these authors apply a stupefyingly inclusive concept of the sequence to discuss Hardy's *Poems of 1912-1913*, Pound's *Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *A Shropshire Lad*, *Spoon River Anthology*, *The Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *Life Studies*, and much, much more. About Edgar Bowers's *Autumn Shade*, however, they have not a word to say.

It is too bad, of course, that these critics overlooked such a distinguished example of the sequence, just as it is too bad that they did not share Edgar Bowers's much more intelligible view of the sequence form. Bowers saw the sequence not as something sprawling and open-ended (e. g., *The Cantos*) but rather as something sculpted and compact, capable of sustaining lyric concentration even as it explores narrative, meditative, and descriptive possibilities. All of these components coexist gracefully in *Autumn Shade*. This series of ten short poems in blank verse takes the form of a journal chronicling an extended visit the poet made to his parents' home in Georgia in 1964. As it progresses, it fashions a laconic but revealing portrait of the artist in his time and place. It moves recurrently from external observation to introspection, attaining perceptions of the nature of the self and the conditions that foster poetic creativity. Its principal discovery is that the self exhibits a doubleness which becomes apparent in any effort at

self-observation, concerted or casual. There is the being that eats and sleeps and draws a paycheck; occupying precisely the same space in the universe is the second self who rescues reality from the dullness of familiarity and supplies the intuitions that result in memorable art. Because Bowers's self-awareness is achieved in a number of progressive stages, the sequence is the ideal form in which to convey his discovery.

Introducing a reading of *Autumn Shade* at Stanford in 1980, Bowers mentioned some of the models he had in mind when writing it in 1964. Modern ones he lists include the work of Crane (no doubt thinking of "Voyages"), Winters's "Fire Sequence," and Cunningham's *To What Strangers, What Welcome*, which was written shortly before *Autumn Shade*. These modern examples, made up of poems that are individually brief, are brief overall. They resemble *Autumn Shade* in scale and proportion, however dissimilar they may be in subject and style. Some sequences Bowers does not mention on the Stanford tape supply intriguing comparisons as well. While *Autumn Shade* ultimately impresses us with its originality, a reader may nonetheless be struck by certain analogues, especially in regard to its narrative method and its imagery.

Considering narrative method, I am struck by the ease with which Bowers moves, as one might say, from outside to inside: that is, from a matter-of-fact rendering of place—a description of setting through what he calls in his Stanford comments "specific notation"—from this, to deeper modes of thinking: memory, self-examination, meditation, speculation. Seeking parallels for these objects of attention and the suppleness of the poet's transitions, I am reminded of Yeats's *Meditations in Time of Civil War*. Granted, there are monumental differences between Yeats's tower in the west of Ireland and the Bowers family property outside of Atlanta. But in both cases the place

provides the material details to which the poet's meditations are anchored, and the sequence form allows for a gradual disclosure of multiple aspects of the setting as well as a progressively deeper engagement on the part of the poet with his own selfhood and artistic powers.

Other parallels, perhaps easier to demonstrate, exist between *Autumn Shade* and two of the sequences of Wallace Stevens. In this case the parallels are evident in a sharing of images. Both poets, admittedly with somewhat different emphases, present us with snakes and angels. In his own autumnal sequence, *The Auroras of Autumn*, Stevens endows the serpent with a number of symbolic aspects. It represents necessity or fate, the cyclical mortality governing the universe; yet in the serpentine flickering of the Northern Lights the poet discerns the presence of a transcendent imaginative force: "the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images, / Relentlessly in possession of happiness." The sequence traces the efforts of the poet to partake, through imaginative capability, of a similar beatitude. In *Autumn Shade* a similar quest is undertaken with a less flamboyant natural backdrop. Bowers's universe is even more desacralized than that of Stevens. In his first section he attempts to recover a sense of the numinousness of nature in the home he has returned to, but the historical belatedness of the attempt is apparent. A logging crew is at work nearby and he knows, he says, "That goddesses have died when their trees died." The nymphs have departed. Unlike Stevens's presiding celestial serpent, Bowers's snake is mastered by natural process rather than mastering it, as autumn moves toward winter: "Coiled in the leaves and cooling rocks, the snake / Does as it must, and sinks into the cold."

More companionable, and even more Stevensian, is Bowers's angel. In his longest sequence, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, Stevens uses the angel as a climactic image of imagination fully engaging reality. The angel is what Stevens calls "the fiction of an absolute." And he asks:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this? . . .

Though more muted in tone, Bowers invokes a similar figure as an enabling, inspiring presence:

If I ask you, angel, will you come and lead
This ache to speech, or carry me, like a child,
To riot? Ever young, you come of age
Remote, a pledge of distances, this pang
I notice at dusk, watching you subside
From tree-tops and from fields.

Bowers, too, seeks "the fiction of an absolute" when he writes, "I postulate a man / Mastered by his own image of himself. / Who is it says, *I am?* Sensuous angel, / Vessel of nerve and blood, the impoverished heir / Of an awareness other than his own?" As is only to be expected of a poem written twenty years after *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, *Autumn Shade* is even more burdened and embattled in its imaginative quest: this is not something which gets any easier for our culture, as meanings falter and myths wither. And yet Bowers, like Stevens, succeeds in achieving a colloquy with the angel

that validates him as a poet. In the climactic section of *Autumn Shade* he feels himself and his surroundings transformed by the angel's visitation:

In nameless warmth, sun light in every corner,
 Bending my body over my glowing book,
 I share the room. . . .

Annunciation, specter
 Of the worn out, lost, or broken, telling what future,
 What vivid loss to come, you change the room
 And him who reads here. Restless, he will stir,
 Look round, and see the room renewed and line,
 Color, and shape as, in desire, they are,
 Not shadows but substantial light, explicit,
 Bright as glass, inexhaustible, and true.

Here the mortal shadow, a pervasive image in the sequence, gives way to a luminous moment out of time. Like all such experiences, this apprehension is fleeting. Yet it suffices, for the angel, it is now clear, is indistinguishable from the other, the second, the higher self the poet has been recurrently conscious of throughout. (In one of his taped readings, Bowers speaks of “the better self that writes the poems.”) As full awareness of the second self emerges in *Autumn Shade*, the sequence enacts and chronicles its own process of creation. Like much of Yeats and Stevens, it is writing about writing. The discipline of poetry is in fact the cultivation of this second self, the sacrifice of one's material being to its higher purposes. One thinks of Bowers's much briefer poem on this theme, “Living Together,” which ends,

In the dark,
 Beneath the lamp, attentive, like a sound
 I listen for, you draw near—closer, surer
 Than speech, or sight, or love, or love returned.

This is a line of thought that is familiar in modern poets whose viewpoints retain a Romantic inflection. Yeats distinguishes between the self that writes poetry and “the bundle of accidents that sits down to breakfast,” yet one would not be there without the

other. Bowers may have found such Romantic ideas of selfhood and imagination congenial, particularly so, I think, in the case of those found in Stevens. But one reason for the artistic success of *Autumn Shade* is the intuitive, deeply personal understanding of the double self and its influence upon life and art that Bowers continued to refine throughout his own life. As concluding evidence of this ongoing preoccupation, here is an excerpt from a letter Bowers wrote in 1967 to his companion James Davis. He writes in the aftermath of a party, his guests having left him to himself. He says: “. . . after several hours of having myself identified and placed by the presence of others, given limits, the strangeness of the self only . . . is a little hallucinating, and suddenly requires the presence of the old self-awareness to assure you that you are really here: one introduces into the room a fictitious person, so that you will be one, also. . . . [T]hat is what we processes require to have any notion of ourselves: a history, which is a memory, but a memory formalized, and so a fiction! Tomorrow I will call you and startle you into life . . . if you follow the complicated reasoning of that remark.” Here, as in the poetry, we see the fiction-making consciousness reflecting upon itself, a process by which art and life vivify one another. I hope I have said enough in this brief talk, or at least quoted enough, to suggest at least this quality of the sequence *Autumn Shade*: its quiet immediacy, its ability, as we read it, to startle us into life.