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Author

Steele, Timothy

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From Persona Poem to Person Poem: Edgar Bowers' "Mary"

Timothy Steele

Stylistically, Edgar Bowers' poetry falls into three phases. First, we have the poems from the late 1940s--the earliest poem he saved, "Epigram on the Passing of Christmas," dates from 1947--to the early 1960s, when he wrote some of his finest lyrics, including "The Astronomers of Mont Blanc" and "An Afternoon at the Beach." These poems are mostly rhymed and stanzaic and concentrated in statement. Second, we have a transitional period from the mid-60s to mid-70s, a period from "Autumn Shade" (1963-64) through "Witnesses" (1975-76). In this phase, though the concentration of statement remains, Bowers' attention turns more to blank verse and more to the poetic sequence, as opposed to the self-contained lyric. Third, we have the poems composed and published from 1986 up to his *Collected Poems* of 1997. Written after a decade of silence, virtually all these poems are in blank verse. Only "The Poet Orders His Tomb" and "The Poet Is Reproved for His Complaint" regularly rhyme. These late poems are also longer and more discursive than his early poems and feature a good deal of circumstantial detail. This morning I will discuss "Mary" as an exemplary poem of his later style and will attempt to suggest the reasons he developed that style.

"Mary" illustrates, among other things, a shift in Bowers' work away from persona poems and to what he called "people poems" or "person poems." The persona poem--also termed "the dramatic monologue"--involves the poet's

assuming the semblance of and expressing himself through a mythological, historical, or Biblical figure. Bowers suggests a kind of definition of the persona poem when he says of "Witnesses" in a letter of 1975: "I got the notion of poems spoken by me, but in the guise of various Biblical characters." Tennyson's "Ulysses," Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," and Yvor Winters' "John Sutter" are fine examples of the genre.

In his earlier and middle phases, Bowers wrote a number of interesting persona poems, including "J. Haydn to Constanze Mozart (1791)," "From William Tyndale to John Frith," "The Prince," "Adam's Song to Heaven," "The Centaur Overheard," and *Witnesses*. He was drawn to the persona poem chiefly, I suspect, because he was fascinated with the relation of individual experience to archetypal condition. He was fascinated with the ways in which individuals realize universal patterns and, conversely, with the ways in which the universal implies individual realizations. The persona poem enables the poet to measure personal experience against a comprehensive type. It enables Tennyson, for instance, to express--in the striving, seeking, unyielding Ulysses--his desperate determination to go on after Arthur Hallam's death. It enables Robinson to express--in the figure of the aging, neglected Rembrandt--his lonely faith in the unfashionable path he himself walks. It enables Bowers to express--through William Tyndale--beliefs about intellectual integrity and the temptations and threats it must guard against.

The persona poem moves from the general to the particular. The archetype is posited at the outset of the poem; then, as the poem develops, the poet launches into his or her ideas and feelings about issues related to the archetype. The "person poem," in contrast, reverses this movement. To use a definition Bowers gave in a reading at the University of Provence in 1995, the

person poem concerns “an individualized person with a real specific individual life of the ordinary everyday variety.” Here particulars are posited first, and the archetype coalesces from them. Specifically speaking of “Mary” at the University of Provence reading, Bowers says that “details are scattered through the poem,” and there emerges “a story about a person who turns out to be a heroine.”

Mary’s heroic stature, in other words, is not announced at the outset, as it would be in a persona poem, at least one entitled “Ulysses,” “Rembrandt to Rembrandt” or “Noah.” Only gradually do we appreciate larger dimension of Mary’s experience. Only toward the poem’s end do we discern that the “ordeal” mentioned at the beginning has a universal quality and is related to the suffering of all humanity. Only gradually do we realize that “the angel of self-discipline” in the first line is a Calvinist version of the angel Gabriel who in Luke’s Gospel visited that earlier Mary when she was pregnant out of wedlock. Only, that is, through the details Bowers presents do we see his Mary as a handmaiden of mercy and sustenance. The archetype becomes clear only toward the end of the poem, with Mary’s emergence in the photograph--“as young / Or old as innocence”--and with the intercessory prayer that concludes the poem. Only then do we see her fully--not just as an individual, but also as a Second Eve, the redemptive mother of us all.

Turner Cassity has related that Bowers draws the details of the poem directly from the life of his Aunt Jennie. Bowers’ main motive for changing her name was probably that he was never sure that Aunt Jennie was the mother of the woman the family presented as her much younger sister. However, in choosing “Mary” as the name of his protagonist, Bowers was also suggesting that, after absorbing the particulars of her life, we might reflect on the larger pattern they embody--a pattern he had dealt with, in different contexts, in his early sonnets about the Virgin Mary.

Three impulses, I think, contributed to Bowers' shifting from the persona to person poems, others of which include "Richard," "Thomas," "Walking the Line," and "On Dick Davis' Reading, California State University, Los Angeles." First, Bowers wanted to try new things and do things other poets weren't doing. Though he cites Robinson and Robert Frost as models for his person poems, he felt that such poems were not being written much in his time. Second and more important, Bowers loved stories. He was himself a great raconteur, and his person poems gave him a chance to express his love and skill for narrative. His early style, for all its virtues, would not allow him to do this. The persona poem itself, though a wonderful vehicle for meditative exploration, is anti-narrative and anti-objective. It involves a pre-established context, and it requires the poet to speak in the first-person. The most pure, unmixed gathering of Bowers' later work, *For Louis Pasteur*, begins and ends with poems that assert the power of story and story-telling to help us discern the significance and seriousness of our lives. Even when Bowers writes of Louis Pasteur, he treats him not as persona, but almost as a character in a novel; and, as is the case with Bowers' person poems, the archetypal element--in this case the existential-Christian nature of Pasteur--is made explicit only at the poem's end.

Finally, the person poem gave Bowers the opportunity to write about his family and friends and to express his faith that the ordinary can be extraordinary and that our fleeting existences may have a transcendent meaning. There is *vita brevis* quality throughout Bowers' work; but in his person poems he urges that, if life is short, a depth of being underwrites it, and it partakes of larger patterns of hope and intelligence. And in another late poem "How we Came from Paris to Blois," he elegizes young soldiers of his World War Two army division who perished in the Battle of the Bulge, and he speaks of being

Astonished by the brimming presences

Of voices, looks and stories, however brief,
Like none before, never to be again,
And [I] see in them a cause for the belief
That nature loves too well the soul it makes
Willingly to let it pass away forever.

The person poem enabled Bowers to write of the brimming presences in his own life and to insure that they would not pass away forever.

* * * * *

The text of Edgar Bowers's "Mary" follows below.

MARY

The angel of self-discipline, her guardian
Since she first knew and had to go away
From home that spring and have her child with strangers,
Sustained her, till the vanished boy next door
And her ordeal seemed fiction, and the true
Her mother's firm insistence she was the mother
And the neighbors' acquiescence. So she taught school,
Walking a mile each way to ride the street car--
First books of the *Aeneid* known by heart,
French, and the French Club Wednesday afternoon;
Then summer replacement typist in an office,
Her sister's family moving in with them,
Depression years and she the only earner.
Saturday, football games and opera broadcasts,
Sunday, staying at home to wash her hair,
The Business Women's Circle Monday night,
And, for a treat, birthdays and holidays,
Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald.
The young blond sister long since gone to college,
Nephew and nieces gone, her mother dead,
Instead of Caesar, having to teach first aid,
The students rowdy, she retired. The rent
For the empty rooms she gave to Thornwell Orphanage,

Unwed Mothers, Temperance, and Foster Parents
And never bought the car she meant to buy;
Too blind at last to do much more than sit
All day in the antique glider on the porch
Listening to cars pass up and down the street.
Each summer, on the grass behind the house--
Cape jasmine, with its scent of August nights
Humid and warm, the soft magnolia bloom
Marked lightly by a slow brown stain--she spread,
For airing, the same small intense collection,
Concert programs, worn trophies, years of yearbooks,
Letters from schoolgirl chums, bracelets of hair
And the same picture: black hair in a bun,
Puzzled eyes in an oval face as young
Or old as innocence, skirt to the ground,
And, seated on the high school steps, the class,
The ones to whom she would have said, "*Seigneur,*
Donnez-nous la force de supporter
La peine," as an example easy to remember,
Formal imperative, object first person plural.
Edgar Bowers (1924-2000)