

Review of *Dictations* by Arthur Boyars (Lexington, MA: Philidor, 2012)

The great enigma that arises from reading Arthur Boyars' poems is, Why isn't this man more famous?

Part of the answer lies in the back story.

Arthur Boyars was born in 1925; the earliest poem in this collection dates from 1940, when he was fourteen. "Out of a meaningless beginning / Towards an insecure conclusion / We move the point of anchorage," the poem begins, and concludes with the line "To squeeze some beauty from the grudging world." Bear in mind, this is an adolescent boy writing—uncannily sentient for his years. The young poet had expectations of life, and they were mostly somber, laden with angst and existential dread. He knew that bad things were happening in the world, and his forebodings were soon borne out: the Battle of Britain would unfold that same year. Though too young for military service, Boyars saw duty as emergency fireman during the Blitz. "I've seen it all, been there," he writes, many years later, "Put out the fires of bombs, / Heard news of massacres."

Yet when the smoke cleared away, he didn't do all that badly. He had his first volume of poems published by Fortune Press in 1944 (on high-quality paper in a time of paper shortages), and a year or so later went up to Oxford, where he became editor of *Oxford Poetry* and member of a group known vaguely as The Movement, which included the likes of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Thomas Gunn, and Kingsley Amis. He also cofounded, along with John Wain, a small but respected poetry review called *Mandrake*, which lasted through 1957 and featured a roster of poets who would achieve fame on both sides of the Atlantic: a sampling on the American side would mention James Merrill, Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop, William Jay Smith, and Donald Hall. Arthur Boyars knew quality when he saw it. And he was getting his own poems published in significant places; his poem "Funeral," from 1949, was archived until recently on the *Kenyon Review* website, side-by-side with a poem by W.H. Auden from the same issue. His poem "Lycidas," audaciously alluding to Milton, was read live on the BBC (by Jill Balcon, mother of the actor Daniel Day Lewis).

Still, things went wrong. A journey to Rome to study under renowned scholar Mario Praz was cut short by a lucrative job offer from an English publisher; when Boyars arrived back in London the job turned out to be spectral. Discouraged and broke, thwarted in his academic goals, he turned to what came naturally—writing reviews. But 1950s Britain was still recovering from the war; poverty was the norm, and reviewers were little more than intellectual slaves.

A decade passed; a few poems trickled out but eventually ground to a halt. For lack of alternatives, Boyars set himself up as an "advertising consultant" (a term he coined), and

marketed his skills to prestigious art concerns. Much to his surprise, he found himself succeeding. Around the same time, he fell in love with and married a woman named Marion Lobbenberg, who had previously formed a publishing partnership with John Calder, a firm that would soon become Calder/Boyars; after a divvying up in 1975, it would be known as Marion Boyars Press—publisher of such notables as Elias Canetti, Kenzaburo Oe, Ken Kesey, Ivan Illich, and Samuel Beckett. Boyars also translated poems by Yevgeny Yevtushenko; together, the two conducted a UK book tour.

But the poet was silent.

Until one cold December day in the year 2000. Marion had died of cancer less than two years earlier, and Arthur was on his own, visiting his not-much-older uncle in a wooded suburb of Philadelphia. Out for a solitary winter stroll, he returned to his uncle's house to find both doors locked and its residents absent. He brushed snow off a deck chair and waited; anger boiled up and kept him warm. A half-hour passed. An hour. And then, as he reached for his pen and grabbed a piece of newspaper, a poem poured out for the first time in forty years:

“In the beginning is Death,” he wrote. “The cloud of unbeing / Where the creature first lies.” Within minutes the poem was complete, not to be changed by a single comma. It seemed to have come from nowhere, from depths the poet hardly knew—a form of “Rilkean dictation.” Thus the book's title.

Three-quarters of these poems are new, follow-ups to the bitter missive composed on his uncle's deck. With the blockage gone, the poems kept coming. The last quarter of the book consists of earlier poems, including the opener from 1940. There is a continuity throughout, and a strange ambivalence about the poems' ultimate source. At times the fount appears to be a classical muse; at other times it is more akin to a dark, Manichean god, a deity of malicious intent for whom the poet is a mere word-bearing vessel. In some of the poems the source might even be identified as the Judeo-Christian God:

These words have fallen on
My soil like asteroids,
Have burned into my being
And are now credited to me
When they are yours and yours alone . . .

Tellingly, the poems often dialogue with famous works of art, brooded upon in great museums. This one, for instance, on Cranach's depiction of Adam and Eve:

She offers him the fruit, and he's unsure
Whether to accept or not . . .

Or this one, on a painting by Massys:

Of life only half an eyeful
Is ever granted us. Of beauty too . . .

This interplay of art and life is perhaps the dominant theme—the mysterious nature of beauty and our inability to grasp it whole, the ongoing work of finding it and keeping it close, an aesthetic philosophy, as it were, overlaid with religious imagery. Even in the poet's dreams the sacred and the pulchritudinous mingle:

Into the Square, as large as a great field
Ready for sowing, and on the left
A church — “A gem” I said to my companion
Who is dead, and then we trod the stairs

And looked inside: a mighty canvas
Draped its every nook with perfect hieroglyphs . . .

Boyars sometimes gives the impression of a petulant child periodically soothed by a Parent who loves him anyway, or a traditional psalmist whose vociferous complaints to YHWH are part of the deal. “What, save its coarse birth into your darkness / Can you deliver? What has become / Of your long-promised light?” The visions, the poems themselves, are a sop for his persistence.

As you might expect from a man nearing the end of his ninth decade, there are many poems of loss and sorrow. The prescient fourteen-year-old saw it coming. *Dictations*, in this respect, is a synopsis of one man's life and times, the pangs of youth and the pains of old age—a nutshell version of the whole.

But as befits a familiar of the muse, there's music along with the regrets. Reflecting on a performance of Beethoven's Opus 111 by Sviatoslav Richter, Boyars writes:

From his most private repertoire of notes
He makes his sound, just like the poet
From his repertoire of words. They are
Two sides of the same coin, each ascends

The staircase of his song, and only they
Know how to impose its order . . .

Dictations offers a glimpse of Boyars' private repertoire, properly ordered. We can be glad he got it into print before it was too late.

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