



Toby Dantzic (Harrow; Wadham 1994)

Reading from Sir Maurice Bowra's *New Bats in Old Belfries*

Before I read the poem, I want to say a few words about what James meant to me. I was lucky enough to be taught by him at Harrow – both Classics and English. They were my favourite subjects, and that's doubtless due to James unique ability to inspire and unlock their pleasures. But also, as for so many, he was a big part of my life outside the classroom – directing me in plays, taking groups of us to the theatre, and even abroad: my Classics class went on particularly memorable, somewhat rowdy, trips with him to Rome and Turkey.

And then our story continued together in a unique way. I came to Wadham and studied Classics and English, the very subjects he'd taught me, and then a couple of years after I'd arrived James took up his post at the college. I can remember feeling a bit uncertain about his arrival, in a way that you might when your teacher from school turns up university with potential ammunition about your adolescent eccentricities. Any qualms soon dissipated, however, simply because James was such fun to be around, and because he was so enthusiastic about being at Wadham. And in the end, having that connection with him was something I really came to value - obviously as a great source of mischief and gossip, which I hope the poem I'm about to read captures something of, but also as a reminder to me of the good parts of where I'd come from and what I had to be grateful for.

After James died, I dug out my old copy of Aeneid II that he taught me from for A-level. Inside I was astonished to find a text so densely annotated with notes and pencil markings it was barely legible. Every word was underlined or had an arrow shooting off it, the sides of the page crammed with explanations of some sort – testament to the detailed scholarship that James imparted so brilliantly to his students. But then I turned to the front of the book, and I saw that I had scrawled a direct quote from James to the class. I'd written, Mr Morwood says, "above all, remember this is POETRY (capital letters). How does it make you feel?" I was incredibly moved when I read this, I think because it captured precisely what James did for me. His extraordinary academic precision aside, the quote reminded me of the side of him that encouraged freedom in his students, to throw away academic constraints and follow our emotional responses to art and literature. And more than that, he made it clear that it wasn't just that this personal response was available to us, but also that discovering it was worthwhile and that it meant something. It was this confidence he gave me in my own mind, of having something useful of my own to contribute, which I still call on today, and for which I can't thank him enough.

Sir Maurice Bowra, *ALR* Loquitur*

Pass me the mustard, Raymond; I'm catching the train to Poole,
Where I'm due to present the prizes at the mental deficient's school.
Then I make a cross-country journey, via Crewe, to Bilston, Staffs,
Where I'm lecturing on my prose style and auctioning autographs.

Then I shall write an article to prove that *Horizon's* absurd,
That Gibbon's a second-rater and Stephen Spender's a turd.
Then I shall do my broadcast on Martyn Skinner's work,
And write to the papers explaining that Simmons is greater than Burke.

Do you think intellectuals in London can realise how sublime
Is the sparkling conversation at an All Souls breakfast-time?
I've tried to make them respect me; God only knows how I've tried,
I've proved myself odder than Stoughton, I've conquered both time and tide,
I'm poet, historian, critic – at politics I've done my bit.
I'm a genius, Raymond, a genius, but everyone says I'm a shit.

* A.L. Rowse (1903-97), Fellow of All Souls, historian, 'notorious for his egocentricity and his inflated opinion of his own merits' (*New Bats in Old Belfries* p. 123, n. 1; the poem is on pp. 154-5)