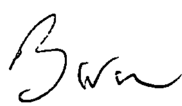
July 28, 2001

Dear Don,

Here is the talk I gave in Oneonta. I wrote it for the occasion of the workshop. I've been thinking about Joe Bolton's work and about romanticism and wanted to say something. The Brookner book I mention is acute but awfully brief (Baudelaire in a dozen pages or so).

"Life goes on, after the thrill of living is gone," a rock and roller once wrote and I love Joe Bolton for conveying the thrill of feeling in poem after poem. I think he's a very important poet. Having his work available means a great deal to me and you deserve profound thanks for making the book possible. In terms of both feeling and art, he's become a touchstone for me.

Best wishes,



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My subject today is the poetry of Joe Bolton. Since Joe Bolton is not a household name I will say a few words about him. He wrote something like 500 poems during his twenties and a selection of his work representing over 100 poems and entitled The Last Nostalgia (the phrase was culled from Wallace Stevens) was edited by Donald Justice and published by the University of Arkansas Press in 1999. Bolton studied and taught in three, university creative writing programs during his twenties. He committed suicide in 1990 at the age of twenty-nine.

It is not easy to gauge the worth of a writer who died so young. In this regard, an anecdote from the world of Buddhism comes to my mind. The Korean, Zen master Seun Sangh became enlightened early in his twenties. He was practicing in a monastery in Korea with monks, many of whom were much older than he and who had sat for decades and not achieved enlightenment. Their response to Seun Sangh's enlightenment was to tell him it was a good idea for him to leave Korea and go to some place that desperately needed enlightenment – like the United States. They weren't thrilled to have someone around who accomplished in a few years what they had not accomplished in many. Thus Seun Sangh came to the United States and worked as a washing machine repairman in the Providence, Rhode Island area before founding a Buddhist center.

I tell the story because it is unsettling when a young writer does truly outstanding work and Joe Bolton did truly outstanding work. It isn't just a matter of fine writing because there is plenty of fine writing to go around these days, so much so that

in uncharitable moods I yearn for the unruly and bumptious and pull down the likes of Gregory Corso off the shelf. It's that Joe Bolton was a deeply compelling poet and that is why I read poetry – to be compelled.

What compels me about Bolton is his unqualified, unrepentant romanticism. There is a song by the Beatles that was in the movie Yellow Submarine that is called "It's All Too Much." That title tells you about Joe Bolton and life – it was all too much. He was tremendously, to quote Donald Justice's word, "appreciative" of life. As much as any poet who ever wrote he was sensitive to light and atmosphere and he describes them lovingly in poem after poem after poem. He adored the physical world – the vegetal, the fleshly, the watery. At the same time, he was unnerved deeply by the fact of transience. He couldn't abide it. It was literally too much for him, unbearable in its sweetness and, as it was fated to pass by, unbearable in its misery.

Before I say too many words about Bolton's poetry, I want to read you a poem by him. Here is "Metropolitan Twilight."

It's fair to say that this poem is representative of Bolton's corpus. It speaks to the physical world; it notes the passage of time – Bolton was obsessed with twilight for what seem obvious reasons: its fleetingness, its hauntedness, its imprecision, its invitation to imagination, its melancholy. The poem, as it notes the perfection of the present, seeks to banish the past but human beings are not easily mollified: "The heart cries out for what it dreams / It has lost." "You are sad for

you couldn't say / What reason." The poem regards intimations of mortality but offers no answer. It prefers, as so much American poetry prefers, the resolution of the physical world as we humans choose to interpret and not interpret it: "... the moon, for him, / Is a bright, magnificent coin / That can't be spent in this world."

It's a dying fall ending but it's not at all ironic. There is no irony in Bolton in the sense of the poet making points by pointing out terrible discrepancies. Bolton is aware of the discrepancies – he is as much a social poet as he is a lonesome poet. Many of his poems take place in cities and he is very shrewd about American pretensions and failings. But the sort of irony that a segment of contemporary American poetry relishes has no savor for Bolton. I think that's because in employing irony the writer wins, in the sense that a point has been made that contributes to affirming the writer's sense of life. Irony wrings meaning from futility and it is hard to avoid self-congratulation. For Bolton there is no winning. He is blue and there is no going beyond that blueness. All there is to do is explore it, try to live with it, rue it, at some moments even mock it, but never escape it.

This attitude has led many a commentator on romanticism to remark on romanticism's adolescent quality. Romanticism doesn't want to grow up and go to work and pay the mortgage and develop status and endorse sturdy, commonplace attitudes. Romanticism lacks any workaday dynamic because it feels that the soul is fatally implicated in the human condition. Once birth occurs it's all over: we're here and, for the modern romantic, we're here in a post-

religious society. The soul that should be the focus of life is at best an afterthought and at worst an embarrassing remnant. What the romantic faces in modern, social life is death-in-life.

In this sense Bolton is the heir of Baudelaire, Blake, Eliot, and Plath – all, despite Eliot's protests about his classicism, deeply romantic poets, poets who felt the hand of mortality and the human panic to avoid recognizing mortality, a panic that found expression in the way people live. In the tradition of Baudelaire's Paris, Eliot's London, Plath's vicious, well-meaning mental wards, here is Bolton's "Death in Orange County."

We are given the precision of the physical, social world and we are given – to use Baudelaire's word – a powerful sense of "ennui." As his terza rima leads him on, Bolton looks over the artifacts of prosperous lives with a sort of sweet bemusement as if to say, "Well, this is it. What fuss is there to made about it?" The sense of lost lives that informs The Waste Land and that shivers in Baudelaire and Plath is much cooler here, more distant, but not, I think, any less affecting. There's no attempt to make anything out to be other than it is – to search for signs of inwardness where none exist, to revel in the transfiguring powers of poetry the way Stevens did. To end the poem with the mundane actualities divorced of the glamour of description is to acknowledge how insensate our sensate lives can become, how murderous our comforts can be. All the poet's devotion to the physical world cannot save how human beings live their lives.

Bolton knew this first-hand and he follows it through poem after poem. Consider the sonnet (Bolton was a great writer of sonnets) "The Lights at Newport Beach."

The series of qualifying "if's" refuses to let us off easy. As in the classical sonnet Bolton advances propositions in order to modify them as he moves through three proposals that he avers – only to write "but not tonight." Accomplishment is never that simple because there is always the nag of desire and imagination, of what could be and should be and might be and wants to be. The physical world that humans create offers seemingly endless spectacle and endless background as the poet wanders through this world. (And "wander" is the word: the poet is a wayfarer, a gypsy whose life is not dominated by the engines of post-industrial purpose.) Everything is a backdrop but everything exists in its own right. So, after yet more "if's" which stretch almost to comedy in their pushiness if they weren't so despairing, the sonnet, which loves rhetorical turns, turns one more time with an immemorial "but." Language abets our moving away from the physical world but Bolton doesn't go out and engage Newport Beach. He "just want[s] to watch it burn." The double-dealing "burn" is delicious, as we feel the energy, spectacle and waste of the scene. Bolton preserves his crucial distance. It is his humanity as a sensitive observer, a watcher, and yet it plagues him as it keeps him from simply acting and accepting the circumstantial drama of life.

"The Lights at Newport Beach" is typical Bolton in that he is always conducting an inquisition of sorts about his motives. Over and over again he prods his – and

other people's -- inclinations. The notion of relating an anecdote for the sake of relating an anecdote is foreign to Bolton's sensibility. It's a sensibility I would call lapsed Protestant in the sense that he knows what salvation is, doesn't want it, and misses it dearly. The habits of inwardness are vigorous – they are in part what make him a poet -- but the structure that supported the inwardness is long gone. There isn't a church or a preacher in his poetry. His poems are strewn with religious words – "holy," "numinous," "purity," "forever," "faith," "saved," "angel" – but the contexts are hardly religious. Typically they are situated in scenarios of love lost and time past, fornications and long summer afternoons where time seemed to stop. Time is Bolton's religion in the sense that he cleaves to it because it shows him the true face of life – inevitable, relentless loss. It is his cross. There is never a whiff of transcendence or epiphany in him; those are ways out and hence dishonest. There is in him, what Anita Brookner in her book Romanticism and Its Discontents remarked of the painter Delacroix, namely "an admixture of stoicism and extravagant imagination." From an American perspective another way of saying this would be to call him a Southern existentialist. It's easy to imagine him in the company of Faulkner and Walker Percy, at once disabused about human motives and full of feeling for the pathos and violence of human motives.

I have delayed offering a definition of romanticism so let me try one now. Romanticism is the soul's protest at a world that no longer acknowledges the soul. It is something-ness talking to nothingness. Romanticism is an anti art, an

art that stems from a wound. In pre-Romantic art, which is to say Christianity-based art, the soul's stature is a given. It may be treated cavalierly as in the likes of a Christopher Marlowe but its importance is incontestable. It is the foundation of spirit, God's special gift to every person. In the modern world, what replaces religion is socialization – self replaces soul as individuals learn to live as best they can in mass societies. For many romantics mass society is a sort of hell (think again of Eliot's London) – a place where the unique savor of individual lives and spirits is sacrificed to mechanical expediency, abstraction, and alienation. The romantic artist who is unable to come up with an alternative vision (Eliot's Christianity or Stevens's fiction making or Stanley Kunitz's quest for myth) is in a hard situation. That was Bolton.

Here is a poem that comes from that situation. It's called "Watching Bergman Films with My Father" (a great title).

That the poem implicitly engages another artist is part of what makes it to my mind so compelling. We recognize Bergman's vision as Bolton presents it but he doesn't dwell on the details of his own situation. Description for the sake of description is beside the point. The world is the world and there is no other. The camaraderie between the son and the father is, at once, touching and saddening. They are watching – that awful yet necessary modern passivity – and they share that watching but it only confirms what they already know too well, that "deep understanding of despair." The honesty of the poem's close is terrible yet its

truthfulness feels deeply honorable. We take what we are given and that is painful to confront. We would rather fuss and act as though we called the shots. "We need the world" and we can make whatever we want out of that neediness but there it is – a physical and spiritual fact.

This is not to say that Bolton is a determinist. As Isaac Bashevis Singer once remarked to someone who asked him if he believed in free will, "Do I have a choice?" He relishes one extreme of free will – suicide because it so clearly states the case for human action for the sake of human action. That the action destroys the human being is part of the strange glory of the action. He notes in his poem entitled "A Couple of Suicide Cases" that the protagonist who kills himself "will feel entirely free / for the first time in his life." Bolton is haunted by those who have been there before him, who have exercised their franchise and voted for death rather than letting death come for them. Inevitability is compromising and Bolton telescopes life drastically because he sees loss in every moment. His ex-wife wrote in a memoir that at his death Bolton had ravaged his body to the point where he had worn out his lungs through chain smoking and his liver through alcoholism. He was old before his time. He wanted to be old before his time.

The wonder of this is that Bolton's poems shimmer with beauty. The keenness of the beauty exists, I think, in direct relationship to the intensity of the longing and despair. He had what was called in less analytical and self-conscious eras "the

soul of a poet" in the sense that he was in love with the physical world and wanted to express that love with words. He has his pure moments where, by his standards, he lets the world be, as in the short poem entitled "Tall Palms."

The poem speaks exquisitely for itself; what I wish to call attention to is its relaxed formalism. It rhymes but quietly. It conjures up enough meter to keep us carefully engaged but it doesn't offer up meter as a form of redemption. As such it typifies Bolton's approach to poetry, an approach I would call modern formalism. I mean that Bolton recognizes the tonic effect meter and rhyme can have on the imagination and on the spirit. There is a calm to Bolton's similarly lengthed lines that I suspect wouldn't be there without the aid of meter. He had to fill the lines and he does fill the lines and that filling is a precious task for him. He doesn't want to rush and he doesn't have to and he can follow the twists and turns of his spirit deliberately. Rhyme and meter are sort of angels to his spirit as they allow him his imaginative dignity. The openness of sheer free verse (and Bolton writes it at times) may have felt too helter-skelter for someone with too much edginess to begin with. The closures of rhyme and meter speak to his propensity for a sort of tonal hush, the obsessive yet alert summoning of the past. He was elegiac and he appreciated form as it allowed him to shape those feelings into something that mimicked perfection. The consolations of poetry must have been great for him as they offered him artifacts he could construct as stays against the time he so thoroughly rued and indulged. One feels in reading through the selection that Donald Justice made a formalist intelligence trying out

form – the book is an education in the process (including a very acceptable sestina) but Bolton does not come off as a neophyte. One senses that he worked at his poems and that he steadily opposed the glibness that formal cadences can impart. The famous assurances of meter were foreign to someone who distrusted assurance and he thrived on that disjunction.

Bolton showed no signs of wanting to turn poetry into a religion. Poetry was the servant of his experience; he respected the genius of the forms and rhythms in their own right but he was too immersed in the intractable realities of American life to make poetry into a separate reality. Bolton strikes me as a deeply American poet in the sense that he reflected time and again about what it meant to be an artist in this society and what that society was. In his homages to other artists such as Hart Crane, Hank Williams, and Sherwood Anderson (a wonderful trinity) he speaks to the metaphysical depths the artist must encounter and the mundane surfaces that are, for better and for worse, the texture of American life. Here is his poem on Sherwood Anderson:

Of course, it must be the "last maple leaf" that doesn't merely fall but "trembles and drifts away." One can mock the romantic attitude – the loneliness and the loss that is so certain one almost is bored by it. But in our deeply socialized world Bolton's awareness of Anderson's situation seems both important and moving. Anderson had to make a choice and live with that choice and we still, as artists, have to make that choice and understand that what we do illustrates how – for all

the attendant publicity that accompanies some brilliant careers – "Ink that was words blurs on the scraps of paper / Floating off down the river." All the detailing Bolton provides situates the poem in a very recognizable social world that is not to be trifled with, that aids and ruins and, as "The terrible mythology of the real" almost taunts the artist to deal with it. Anderson did not turn away from that taunt and Bolton's honoring him reflects Bolton's own stubborn engagement with an America that smiled heartlessly at him, that had no more sense of what to do with his intensities than it had to do with Hart Crane's or many other artists. Bolton would have been the first to say, "Why should it?" He knew he lived in a commercial republic but the casual destructions of American living gnawed at him because they meant the loss of not just time but place too. The South from which he sprang and where he lived a good deal of his life was disappearing in front of his eyes and when in "Speaking of the South, 1961" he revisits the town in which he was born in the year of his birth, he begins the poem by evoking the historical moment:

John F. Kennedy is alive and loved, and the moon remains
Somewhat of a mystery, and suburbs and shopping malls

Are mainly somebody's bad ideas, and you can still
Speak of the South in a voice not wholly laden with loss.

I think one reason I am attracted to Bolton is that he is a post-60s writer in that he wonders where the energy went and whether every good impulse is inevitably degraded. He's haunted and he keeps putting his finger on the past in hopes of making the present seem more actual. It doesn't work and so he is haunted all

the more. The American devotion to novelty is remorseless and somehow that devotion is maddening when set against the near-eternities of earth and sky. His native Kentucky is in his blood but much of his (and his friends') desire is to get the hell out of Kentucky, to flee via alcohol and fast cars and death from what holds no promise, from what is lost and doesn't have the sense to know it's lost. What he is left to ponder is the waste of it all, the lives that don't add up, couldn't add up, and finally dissolve. Here is "Hell" (section five of a five-part poem entitled "West Kentucky Quintet").

One wonders why love is bound to be pathetic. Bolton looks back in poem after poem at what went wrong but he never puts his finger on it. Probably there is no "it" to put a finger on beyond Bolton's obsessions that must have had the effect of blocking the other person out of his life as, at the same time, he desperately wanted the person to be part of his life. His romanticism easily shades into a form of idealism about women. He is unnerved by beauty and doesn't know what to do with it – but then who does? What strikes one about Bolton is that he wasn't willing to push his feelings aside and make do. They were precious to him, they were what, in the last analysis, he had. If they ruined him in ways, they supported him in others. The poem "The Woman with the Dog" (alluding to Chekhov's story) is exemplary of his longings that dwarf his actualities.

"Now I expect less" he writes and in some ways I believe him in his poem but in other ways I don't. The crux of the romantic dilemma is that longing invites stasis,

which is, at its extreme, a species of death. What Bolton wants to do is conjure and capture life, hold onto it even as he knows the impossibility of that endeavor. His alcoholic, fast-driving recklessness is the automatism that tries to shake stasis and becomes another form of stasis. It's an awful situation because one is quite literally doomed and one understands the core of what one might call "dark" romanticism, the romanticism of Coleridge and Baudelaire (as opposed to the uplift romanticism of Wordsworth). One's love of life can only be placated by holding life in check, by turning it into something else (such as words), by summoning up what is past so many times that the summoning starts to feel like a curse, a chore, a supplication to gods whose names one can't recall. The freshness that means so much, the desire that propels life, can only be rued so many times before it starts to fester and spoil. Bolton knew this as well as knowing that "doom" (a word he didn't use) is a ludicrous word in a world that prides itself on its endless, cheerful, advertised choices. That seems one reason that death seems almost a badge of pride for him. It was a doom that was real, that could be summoned to prove his feelings about the impossibilities of life.

His attraction to stasis meant an attraction to the visual arts, particularly to painting. In a number of poems he pursued the lineaments of his attraction, of what it meant to put life in a rectangle, to compose it, and seal it in colors and shapes. Here is his poem about the American representational painter Raphael Soyer. It is entitled "The Artist's Model."

The line that particularly resonates for me is the "all" line: "All body, all paint, all flesh, all surface." It seems an assertion that is enormously important to him as if it were a matter of all or nothing, that he couldn't accept the partial nature of life and of art. The credo of imagism, that the wink of an image is as good as the nod of discourse, means very little to the likes of Bolton who is obsessed with the grandeur of being, a being that won't be held in a brisk image, that always wants more in the way of loving attention and illustration. His chaste, quietly modulated art held him in good stead as it kept his passion in check and forced him to keep making decisions about how much to put into his poems. His art was one of composition, of arranging steadfast elements – as if they were the primary colors. The crucial words are there – "death," "soul," "desire," "blue," "shadow" – but , to a degree, he gets outside of himself in his taking on the model's point of view and Soyer's endeavor as an artist. It's recognizably Bolton's poem but the world of the artist gets its due.

The desire to compose life is unavoidable. It is Bolton's glory and anguish. He gives into it and he knows he gives into it and he loves it because it is like a long caress. There is always the quiver of time within the caress, however, so the poem remains what a poem has to remain – a gesture in the face of time. Here is "The Blue World," a poem replete with visual analogies.

It is the "like" toward the end of the poem where he evokes Matisse's painting that says so much about who Bolton was as a poet. He can't avoid simile and he doesn't want to avoid simile but you feel that his blueness is connected with his

propensity for simile, that he prefers the gesturing brilliance of simile to the skein of human failing that is woven into any life. It frees him and he revels in the freedom. There is a sort of exalted hush in such a poem that is remarkable. It's not tenable; it's not sustainable. It's simply very deeply felt. It doesn't make for good relationships; it's not mature in the sense of carrying on and accepting change for the oblivion that it is. It is a sort of reduction – to turn one of his verbs into a noun – but it's a beautiful reduction and that beauty is a large part of what poetry demands. If it comes at the expense of life, then – and it is a chilling thought – so much the worse for life. The heroism of romanticism, which to many people is a turning away from life's hurly-burly and not in the least heroic, was, for the likes of a Baudelaire or a Bolton, quite genuine in its willingness to propose that original beauty counted for more than socialized agreement. If it was fixated, it could propose that what art that was worthy of the name of art wasn't fixated?

This talk is somewhat grand and it is important to give Bolton his due as a poet who was somewhat grand, who possessed an "extravagant imagination" to quote Brookner again. He reveled in poetry's sense of trumping the reader's expectations about what a poem could display that seemed to come indisputably from life itself. Here is the Bolton poem I wish to leave you with. It is called "Childhood" and was not published during his lifetime.

All the eternal pride of art is here as Bolton delivers an actualized and metaphor-rich verisimilitude that is shattering. Who can forget the scenario and who can

forget the opening similes that say, "This is a poem. You needn't fear." We do fear and we wonder how this poem can resolve itself. The pushy, inquisitive mind calls for narrative – what happens next? Bolton doesn't go there and it's the proof of the wisdom of his art that he doesn't go there. He knows in his bones and his heart that the genius of the poem resides not simply in what happens but in what resides in any given moment. The fullness of his feelings for time serves him well because he senses how omni-directional any moment is. When he moves into the precision of the color, of sun and sky – the deepest actualities – he is turning not away from his scene but further into it. It leads him back to childhood and to a "he" who it is easy to see as the father and which captures the father's tortured ambivalence in a wholly other key. We are left with conclusiveness and wonder. It is why we go to art and why Joe Bolton richly deserves to be read and re-read.