

Ursula Bethell's 'November 1937' and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet

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In his first edition of Ursula Bethell's *Collected Poems*, Vincent O'Sullivan observes in an end-note to 'November 1937' that '[w]ritten across the side of the manuscript is the quotation "Aujourd'hui, avec moi, en paradis - quelle promptitude! quelle compagnie! quel séjour"- Bossuet.' (1985, 106) In his second edition of the *Collected Poems*, O'Sullivan identifies the author of these words as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, a 'seventeenth-century French cleric and theologian' (1997, 108), but the exact source of this quotation remains unknown.¹

From among the thirty-one volumes of correspondence, sermons and other religious writings that comprise Bossuet's *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Librairie de Louis Vivès, 1866), the most promising source for the quotation would seem to be Bossuet's *Oraisons Funèbres*, a collection of funeral orations mentioned by Bethell in a letter to Rodney Kennedy of 26 December 1937². Contemplating whether to request some books from Arthur Prior, Bethell remarks: 'I think I should like Bossuet's *Oraisons Funèbres*'. Yet, while the rhetorical structure of the 'November 1937' manuscript quotation occurs throughout this work (the pattern of three exclamations beginning with 'quelle' here being commonplace) nothing of a similar content appears in this volume.

However, two passages that occur elsewhere in Bossuet's sermons both bear a close resemblance to the 'November 1937' manuscript quotation. The first instance appears in his 'Premier sermon pour le Dimanche de la Quinquagésime, sur l'utilité des souffrances' and reads (1862, VIII, 462):

hodie mecum eris in paradiso: hodie, aujourd'hui, quelle promptitude! mecum, avec moi, quelle compagnie! in paradiso, dans le paradis, quel repos!

¹ The quotation noted by O'Sullivan may be translated: "Today, with me, in paradise" - what swiftness! what companionship! what a place to stay! The allusion is to Christ's words on the cross to the penitent thief: 'Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise' (Luke 23: 32).

² Although the letter to Kennedy postdates the titular date of the poem, that need not preclude *Oraisons Funèbres* from being the source; the memorial manuscripts that survive in the Macmillan Brown Library are almost certainly those sent by Bethell to Lawrence Baigent in 1944 so the finished form of the poem, and equally the quotation from Bossuet, can only be dated between Nov. 1937 and 1944.

The second occurs in his ‘Second sermon pour le Dimanche des Rameaux, sur la nécessité des souffrances’. It reads (1862, IX, 613):

Hodie mecum eris in paradiso. Aujourd’hui, quelle promptitude!
avec moi, quelle compagnie! dans le paradis, quel repos!

The two sermons were delivered by Bossuet (in different years³) on Sundays prior to the Church’s commemoration of Christ’s crucifixion on Good Friday. The ‘Quinquagésime’ of the first sermon refers to Quinquagesima Sunday, the Sunday immediately before Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. The ‘Rameaux’ of the second sermon refers to Palm Sunday (now generally known as Passion Sunday), the Sunday immediately preceding Good Friday and, in Christian tradition ‘devoted to the contemplation of the ‘suffering’ (Latin *passio*) of Jesus from the time of his agonised prayers on the Mount of Olives until his final hours on the cross’ (Metford 56). The focus on suffering in these sermons, and the treatment of religious consolation they include, would no doubt have appealed to Bethell in the years following the death of Effie Pollen (whose passing ‘November 1937’ commemorates, with the rest of the ‘Six Memorials’) and is line with her reading at this time. In an earlier letter to Rodney Kennedy (3 December 1936), Bethell mentions Louis Bertrand’s *The Art of Suffering* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), a work that itself quotes Bossuet on a number of occasions.

However, while these three extracts share some obvious similarities, they also contain a number of significant differences. Unlike Bethell’s manuscript quotation, where the words of Christ are clearly separated from the three exclamations, in both of the sermon extracts, the words of Christ and their consolatory implications are semantically paired: ‘Aujourd’hui, quelle promptitude! avec moi, quelle compagnie! dans le paradis, quel repos!’ The sermon quotations also differ from the extract included on the Bethell manuscript in that the word ‘repos’ is used rather than ‘séjour’ in the third exclamation. Additionally, Bethell uses a different preposition in her version of the words of Christ, writing ‘aujourd’hui . . . avec moi . . . *en* paradis’, rather than ‘Aujourd’hui, avec moi, *dans le* paradis’ [my italics].

In spite of these not insubstantial differences, the passages I have identified in Bossuet’s sermons still seem the likeliest source for Bethell’s quotation, since those differences are probably indicative of error on her part rather than to be accounted for by positing another reference.

The most obvious of these apparent inaccuracies is Bethell’s use of the preposition ‘en’. The masculine ‘le paradis’ requires that ‘in paradiso’ be

³ The sermon for ‘Quinquagésime’ was delivered in 1658, and that for ‘Rameaux’ in 1661.

translated as '*au paradis*' or '*dans le paradis*' [my italics], the latter being more common in the seventeenth century. Bethell's use of 'en' is thus a clear mistake.⁴

Bethell's use of 'séjour' is also dubious. 'Séjour,' typically meaning 'stay,' appears at first glance to be an error as it is grammatically questionable. However, 'séjour' can also mean 'place to stay'. The fact that (as in Bossuet's sermons) this exclamation refers to the 'paradis' section of Christ's words means that this translation is the more logical. Yet arguably 'séjour' is a less suitable word choice than the sermons' 'repos' (meaning 'rest') in the context of the other exclamations included in this passage. 'Repos' is certainly more in line with the descriptive nature of 'compagnie' and 'promptitude'. Additionally, the fact that 'repos' appears in Bossuet's only two sermons to give extended consideration to the consolatory nature of Christ's words to the penitent thief, indicates a preference for the word 'repos' by Bossuet.

From these observations it may be concluded that the words as they appear on the Bethell manuscript cannot represent a direct quotation from Bossuet. It seems highly unlikely that the incorrect preposition of the 'November 1937' manuscript quotation could be a mistake by Bossuet or contained in an anthology of his writings. Similarly, Bossuet exhibits a definite preference for the word 'repos' as opposed to the 'séjour' of the Bethell manuscript. Rather than transcribing a passage directly from Bossuet, these inaccuracies would seem to suggest that Bethell is recalling one of the sermon extracts from memory. This would also explain the different structure of the Bethell manuscript quotation.

The likelihood that Bethell is merely recalling the general wording and structure of the Bossuet quotation also means that, in terms of poetic significance, the problem of deducing which particular sermon she is referring to is somewhat lessened. For Bethell's apparent lack of concern as to the accuracy of the passage would seem to indicate that no specific context is being invoked. Indeed, Bethell's inaccuracies suggest a less than thorough knowledge of the extract and its placement. Bethell's own non-specific attribution, 'Bossuet', certainly does not invite the reader to look up, nor recall, a definite context and similarly implies a lack of comprehensive knowledge on Bethell's part. Consequently, while the quotation from Bossuet contributes to the meaning of 'November 1937' in terms of the words included on the manuscript⁵, it does not act as a functional allusion inviting the reader to

⁴ I am indebted to Philip Knight of the French Department at Victoria University of Wellington for his assistance on this point and for his insights concerning Bethell's use of 'séjour'.

⁵ The quotation clearly echoes line 15 of the poem and the allusion to the Luke 23: 43 ("To-day, with me") and emphasises the consolatory capability of these words.

consider contextual origin in depth. The location of the source of this quotation is thus of more general literary and biographical significance.

How exactly Bethell happened upon the source of the quotation she inscribed across the manuscript of 'November 1937' is at this stage difficult to determine. Certainly no volume of Bossuet's works remains among the books formerly owned by Bethell now housed at the Macmillan Brown Library. Similarly, the correspondence to and from Bethell presently available does not provide any answers on this issue. The precise details of how Bethell came upon the source of the manuscript quotation, it seems, will have to wait until additional documents relating to the life and work of Ursula Bethell become publicly available.

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