

## *The Academic Generation*

**Poets in Their Youth: A Memoir**, by Eileen Simpson, *New York: Random House, 1982. 272 pp.*

IF ANYONE STILL needs proof of what the academy has done to poets and poetry, Eileen Simpson provides it in this splendid memoir of her first husband, John Berryman, and his circle of friends—chiefly Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, and Randall Jarrell. The book covers the period from 1942 until she separated from Berryman in 1953 (an “Afterword” summarizes briefly the careers and deaths of the major figures up to the suicide of Berryman in 1972).

Simpson begins with Berryman during his Harvard days, when he could neither separate himself from, nor merge with, the academic establishment. There follows a summer in New York when, jobless, he searched desperately for work until he landed the first of a series of temporary appointments at Princeton, where R. P. Blackmur became a dominant figure in his life. Along the way he summered with Robert Lowell and Jean Stafford, who were both already battling alcohol (Schwartz, she implies, was getting hooked on drugs prescribed by his psychiatrist). Berryman, on the basis of a misdiagnosis, was declared 4-F, and Lowell, after being turned down for commissions in two of the services, decided the allied bombing of Europe was immoral and became a conscientious objector. Jarrell returned from the war to take up his position as “the critic who made even first-class poets fear for their skins,” Berryman believing that all poets respond to witty attacks as frantically as he did. Turbulent times, certainly, but the war serves mainly as a backdrop for the action that takes place within the confines of the university.

After the war, as Simpson points out, “The game of poetical chairs—in which writers move from campus to campus, pausing for shorter or longer periods depending on the whim of the whistle-

blower, then moving on to another chair—came into fashion . . .” and Berryman “received invitations from . . . Washington, Vermont, Wayne, Cincinnati and Princeton.” So Berryman, and many postwar poets, moved into that world within a world of creative writing programs, creating cliques, advancing the careers of their students, and inevitably jealously keeping up with one another. Such activity increased paranoia; Simpson gives a good example: Roethke believed that Berryman had stolen his job at Washington, which he actually lost as a result of one of his breakdowns. By the time one comes to the end of the book, it is easy to forget that the poets are any older than they were at the beginning.

Like a novelist, Simpson establishes her dominant image early through an anecdote: the young Delmore Schwartz refuses to sit in a restaurant with his back to the other customers. The academy was, for Berryman and his friends, their chair against the wall as their fears and insecurity shaded into madness and suicide. There they fought their battles against criticism and disapproval and, like boys trying to make the high-school football team, competed against each other, praised and encouraged each other, and became increasingly suspicious of each other.

Berryman is, of course, the focus of the book, a good focus because he is typical of the group: haunted by the suicide of his father, dominated by his mother, desperate for fame, and afraid of the chaotic world outside the university, he turned to father figures, to alcohol, to women to find acceptance and security. Like the others he wrote his best poetry when he was still young because he was incapable of making the shift from youthful spontaneity to middle-aged detachment and control without losing the enthusiasm essential to great poetry. As Simpson demonstrates even as she denies it, their neuroses were intensified by the adolescent competition of academia until they lost the distinction between wanting to write poetry and wanting to be poets. In the midst of an academic

security that now astounds newcomers to the profession, their old fears of failure grew. Schwartz died in a tenement and no one identified his body for two days; Lowell went in and out of mental institutions, as did Roethke; Jarrell probably committed suicide and Berryman certainly did.

Simpson treats her ex-husband and his friends with a fine combination of detachment and compassion, only once—near the end—lapsing into a bitter attack on academic groupies who turned the poetry and creative writing circuit into bouts of drinking, sex, and childish posing. This is understandable; one wishes there were a few more such lapses. Still, many people have been attracted to her memoir by its sensationalism—alcoholism, madness, suicide; but the truth is, the paranoia of a poet is not very different from the paranoia of one's next-door neighbor. ("Artists," Katherine Anne Porter once said, "don't suffer any more than other people; they just talk about it more.") And while some have complained that Simpson doesn't say enough about the poetry, I think *Poets in Their Youth* is most valuable for what it implies: because they were obsessed by their childhood and adolescence—an obsession intensified by their attraction to the Freudian myth—none of these poets ever achieved that "public voice" Yeats (one of their idols) thought characteristic of successful poetry. The university became their family where they once again fought losing battles with their past. And when, like Joyce and Pound, they tried to reject their fathers for others of their own choosing, they could only recreate themselves in their own image: sons who did not measure up to Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats.

Berryman, Jarrell, Schwartz, Lowell—these were men of talent who chose again and again the devil they knew, their past, over the devil they feared, the world around them. Their fascination with failure ultimately produced poetry that celebrated failure and became known and praised in the academy as "confessional." When they tried to break out, they swung from one extreme to the other. Lowell,

who celebrated in "The March II" what he called his cowardice, could find in the world of politics only saints and demons: who would dream, without the title to tell him, that ". . . like a prince, you daily left your tower/ to walk through dirt in your best cloth . . ." was written about Robert Kennedy? And Berryman, writing in Dublin of the "land of Conolly & Pearse" with his master Yeats as model, could only say:

You come & go,  
 free: nothing happens. Nelson's Pillar  
 blows  
 but the busses still go there: nothing is  
 changed,  
 for all these disasters O  
 . . .  
 land of ruined abbeys,  
 discredited Saints and brainless senators,  
 roofless castles, enemies of Joyce and  
 Swift,  
 enemies of Synge,  
 enemies of Yeats and O'Casey . . .

The lines are as flat as the thought is simpleminded and sentimental. Like Yeats, they tried to make poetry out of their battles with an alien world, but unlike him they could never rise above the complexity of "the self" to see clearly the complexity of "the other." Simpson is to be praised for her examination of the causes of their defeat.

The Lost Generation, the Beats, the Hippies—these are all fictions. No two people ever respond to the same historical forces in the same way. But the fictions are not untrue; they are imaginative constructs, like novels, that we use to shape and distort reality to get at abiding truths. Simpson, in creating for us what might be called "the Academic Generation," reminds us that what we think of as "history" was for those who lived it the day-to-day chaos of reality. The lives of these men, like the lives of most of us, were pathetic, not tragic. History, after all, is the great tragedy in which Eden is the lost cause we all fight for.

Reviewed by WARREN LEAMON