
The Poetic Practice

John Haffenden: *The Life of John Berryman*; Routledge & Kegan Paul; Boston.

Working Papers: Selected Essays and Reviews by Hayden Carruth; Edited by Judith Weissman; University of Georgia Press; Athens.

by Thomas H. Landess

It is tempting to say that every famous man ends up with the biographer he deserves. At first glance such a generalization seems true: good men lead lives that appeal to good men; scoundrels behave in such a way as to attract the admiration of scoundrels; witty poets interest witty commentators; the dull fascinate the dull. Or so it might seem. But it just isn't so. For example, take Henry James. As a man he led a colorless and decorous existence. As a fiction writer he carefully avoided creating characters that could be understood with reference to some narrow intellectual schema, whether philosophical or psychological. Who would have predicted, then, that the telling of his life would fall to a Freudian like Leon Edel?

On the other hand, John Berryman may have gotten just what he deserved. There's slight doubt because John Haffenden's flaws as a writer may not relate directly to Berryman's flaws as a human being, but there is, I think, a connection between the two. Haffenden is not, however, a man of limited imagination, unable to grasp the full complexities of another human being. To the contrary, he seems to be a perceptive person whose imagination is equal to the task of piecing together the tissue of complicated relationships that formed Berryman's unhappy life. Generally his account is factual and detailed. The concrete stuff of the life is there: Berry-

Professor Landess is on leave from the University of Dallas.

man's mother-ridden childhood; his mediocre academic career, studded here and there by brilliance; his love affairs; his alcoholism, depression, and hospitalization; his literary struggles and successes; his trying friendships with other poets and critics; his final capitulation to a lifelong obsession with suicide. All of these details—many sordid, a few fascinating—are rendered with a devotion to the particularity of events that is genuine and admirable.

Of course Haffenden's narrative is heavily supplemented with interpretations of action and character. However, his glosses are seldom simplistic or unduly biased. He tries to give his reader every possible viewpoint, and he takes sides only after doing justice to all the

compensate to himself by adopting a radically different pose during the holidays. It seems altogether surprising for such a slight, studious boy who felt demoralised and grey at school, but altogether characteristic of the young Berryman, that at home he pulsed to fashion and jumped at any chance offered to flirt his person before numberless girls in the glittering promise of New York City.

One might reason that the author's insights are valuable and even accessible, despite the veil of prose behind which they hide, but does Berryman really deserve such imperfect treatment, egocentric and difficult though he may have been? In *Working Papers* Hayden Carruth suggests an answer to

"[T]his excellent and harrowing account of John Berryman's life . . . is very much to John Haffenden's credit."

—*The New Republic*

alternatives—a rare quality in a biographer. As a result, no one is tempted to think that John Berryman was either a holy innocent or a Freudian monster. Through his penetration Haffenden has discerned a real human being—selfish, unpleasant, brilliant, entertaining, mad, maddening. Sometimes Haffenden makes this visible in his honestly conceived portrait.

The trouble with this portrait is that it is rendered in words, and Haffenden often has trouble with the English language. For instance:

He inspired lasting and incomparable respect among many of his former students and friends, but an equal unease, if not fear, among an unlike sector of the student body who were accustomed neither to such a personality nor to the ordonnance that he practiced. . . . South Kent School, with its spartan routine of sports and studies, inhibited and humiliated him, but he took every opportunity to

this question while commenting on Berryman's poetic gift, which he defines as: "His ability to wrench syntax out of every convention while remaining, though barely, within the bounds of possible grammar. He is famous for this, of course, but it has nothing whatever to do with metric, it has damned little to do with poetry in general, and I confess I see nothing else in his work." As for Berryman's use of words, Carruth speaks of the poet's "well-known colloquial cuteness," "his deliberate archaisms, inversions, the use of fusty words like 'moot' and 'plaint,'" "Archness, what we used to call sophomorphism," and his "verbal *bizarrierie*." Like subject, like biographer? I suspect that Haffenden was heavily under Berryman's influence during the time he was writing, and as a consequence he adopted some of the same tricks. Thus Berryman does get the biographer he deserves after all—that is, if Carruth's appraisal of Berryman's poetry is sound.

And on such subjects Carruth is generally very sound. In fact, his new collection of criticism goes far to prove what many people have long suspected: that he is perhaps one of our best contemporary critics of poetry. Carruth's reviews are—with one or two exceptions—genuine essays which say something significant about some of the most important poets of our time. Moreover, in many instances he uses the occasion of his reviews to comment on the larger movements in 20th-century poetry and to define the essential nature of the artistry and craft of verse. Thus he is both specific in focus and broad in implication. Yet what is most impressive is Carruth's use of language—his clear, unimpeachable prose which, by its own integrity, argues strongly for the truth of his critical insights. In many ways the most difficult problem for the reviewer of poetry is finding a critical diction. After all, a perceptive reader's response to a poem is complicated and hard to express in words. Consequently, too many commentators take the easy way out by resorting to vague and breathless rhetoric advertising their own cleverness and sensitivity but saying nothing very instructive or concrete about what they've read: "Mr. So-and-So's poetry is redolent with the splendor of life itself, with the deep and abiding mystery of what is lovely and human and perishable and, finally, true."

A little of what Carruth says *sounds* like that, but a close examination of his language reveals it as something slightly different and much more exact in its meaning. For example: "Certainly the poet is motivated by a concern and awareness that far transcend his private circumstances, and certainly his poem is tied very closely to the state of American society. It is a beautiful poem, a convincing poem, and a poem of manifold cultural and social uses." In this summary of his reaction to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, Carruth is dealing with the larger range and sensibilities of the poet, but his usual preoccupation is

with diction and syntax or meter and rhythm, the essential things that distinguish genuine poetry.

Of course, Carruth himself is a poet who understands what it means to be inside the poem looking out, rather than vice versa; such a perspective is not absolutely necessary to a good critic, but it helps him to get to important matters more quickly and unerringly. Also, as a result of wrestling with the language of verse himself, Carruth is probably more aware of the sea change that has taken place in poetry since the early 1950's, when, according to some critics, the diction and syntax of poetry suddenly, orgasmically relaxed and the Age of Eliot came to an overdue end. Carruth sensed the necessity for such a change

even before the popular success of the Beats, as did other established poets such as Berryman, Lowell, and Robert Penn Warren. As early as the late 1940's Carruth began to consider the dangers and possibilities of a new poetic style, and many of these essays are concerned with such theoretical problems as they reveal themselves in the specific poems of specific poets. For example, in reviewing Wallace Stevens he shows himself sympathetic with the best impulses in 20th-century "modernism," and he is hard on some of the newer voices: "Mr. Ferlinghetti claims to write for the street, in the language of the street, yet you can hear on any street in this country language more beautifully and meaningfully and vigorously cadenced than this, even taking into consideration the

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porcine discontinuity of most American discourse." Yet he also shows a measured sympathy for Karl Shapiro's attack on the moderns, despite his rejection of Shapiro's idea that poetry (and poets) should be antirational. And in a fine tribute to Conrad Aiken he joins the attack on the sterile and loveless verse of the latter-day modernists, while commending those who are seeking a newer and more vital language (e.g., Denise Lever-

toy and Robert Creeley).

Hayden Carruth apparently likes every kind of poetry except that which is demonstrably bad, and he spends much of his time in this volume separating the graceful and durable from the facile and mundane in 20th-century poetry. For that, as well as for the beauty and precision of his prose, *Working Papers* is noteworthy. □

Food for Memory

Richard Brautigan: *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*; Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence; New York.

Richard Sennett: *The Frog Who Dared to Croak*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Will Morrisey

The first-person narrative form in 20th-century fiction often asserts individualism while undercutting it. Although it is quickly clear who this "I" wants the reader to believe he is, few fail, in the end, to see who he really is. What isn't always apparent is what the author thinks, or believes, about his narrator's seeming and being. By refusing to judge explicitly, many modern novelists and poets depend on their readers' ability to find a constellation of meaning beyond the narrative's landscape—beyond the individual portrayed. Even in this irreligious time we have some idea of Dante's meaning, but what will readers make of James Joyce six centuries after his death? Joyce himself identified an immediate need for literary archaeologists to interpret his books.

The current literary situation mirrors the familiar political tension between liberty—an assertion of individuality—and authority—the embodiment of

Mr. Morrisey is the author of Reflections on DeGaulle.

meaning. In modern times especially, individuals resent authority but find themselves diminished when it is destroyed. They often get the worst of both: individualism for Stalin, tyranny for the Russians; or, alternatively, anarchy for the many and subservience for the few. Brautigan explores liberty in America. Sennett explores tyranny in Hungary and the Soviet Union. Both use first-person narrators, and both pose the problems individualism causes.

Brautigan's middle-aged narrator remembers the summer of 1947, when he was 12 years old and "the most interesting thing happening in his life" was watching a husband and wife who fished in a pond while sitting in their living-room furniture, carefully trucked out and unloaded each evening at seven. Imitating their deliberateness, he intersperses his description of one afternoon spent waiting for them with memories of his childhood, culminating in the day his "childhood ended"—when he accidentally shot and killed a friend.

The reviewer for the *New York Times* could find no purpose for this procedure, but the narrator explains it simply enough: "I am still searching for some meaning in the story and perhaps even a partial answer to my own life, which as I grow closer and closer to death, the answer gets farther and farther away." Hence the attempt to reverse aging by the means of memory, to recapture childhood, the time when truth seems

closer—not only for Wordsworth's famous reason but because an adult can see "unknown vectors" the child did not see. Brautigan does this well. He remembers the boredom of childhood. His cuteness, which has irritated more than one reader of his other novels, here contributes to a story that does not omit childhood's childishness. Children ponder lying and truth-telling, fantasy and reality, with an intensity most will lose in adulthood; Brautigan knows something of how these intertwine. So, for example, he has his narrator remember the "very ancient and fragile" lock on an old woman's garage door:

The lock was only a symbol of privacy and protection, but that meant something in those days. If that lock were around today, a thief would just walk up to it and blow it off with his breath.

The narrator remembers these things "so the wind"—today's prevailing viciousness, a sort of realism—"won't blow it all away." His memories recapture not only childhood but the more humane minds of that time and place—the American Northwest a couple of years after World War II, "before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity." This isn't quite as sentimental as it sounds; lonely children who spend their days watching, not participating, often find their way to the eccentric adults (mostly old people—old age is a form of eccentricity) who have time for them. The narrator draws these portraits with a bright child's mixture of sarcasm, curiosity, and fondness.

Brautigan has never offered any but the simplest ideas, and his sentiments—the mixture of satire and sympathy Christianity becomes when secularized—recall Dickens (as do his congruent fascinations for eccentrics and children). His style is from Hemingway. The tone belongs to Brautigan, and it is what makes him a most elusive writer. He is