

ence); and Updike writes with equal authority and authenticity about both. If Angstrom's feats are well-remembered, Updike has earned and enjoyed another kind of fame during the same years. Updike went to Harvard and Oxford. The less fortunate Angstrom missed out on college, but served two years in the Army. Updike was spared his generation's military experience, gaining at least a couple of crucial career years thereby. And, inevitably, he makes less of the Army in Angstrom's fictional life than he ought to. It is highly unlikely that it meant as little to Angstrom, in fact and in memory, as it seems to. But this is a very slight weakness and is more than compensated for by the power and capacity of Updike's imagination first to create, then to enter into every aspect of Harry's life and, indeed, the lives of all the others, men and women, young and old, equally who play parts in this story.

I can report that something happens to us when we start growing old and the body begins, in bits and pieces, to fail. Somehow those of us who are survivors and veterans are able to get around the shapes and configurations of different circumstances and distinct experiences and finally see each other as fellows, a judge and jury of peers. This has now happened to Updike and Angstrom. If, once upon a time, Updike was more than a little bit smirky and condescending with Angstrom and his ilk, that's pretty much over and done with by now. There is compassion and understanding here. True, Angstrom does his share of dumb, sometimes ridiculous, occasionally even wicked and unforgivable things, adding his full share to the world's weight of woe; still, his faults and foibles, even his sins, are those of an old friend, someone whom we wish well even as we wish that he did better by himself and others.

A plump book of more than five hundred pages, its jacket lined with the traditional purple and black of penance, *Rabbit at Rest* gets going, outwardly in time, in the aftermath of the explosion of the Pan Am 747 over Scotland and ends with the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. Parallel to this, first in Florida, then in fictional Brewer, Pennsylvania, and environs, then back in West Florida, Angstrom suffers

a heart attack, endures angioplasty, enjoys a kind of slow suicide of forbidden consumption, especially junk food, and ends the story, after another more devastating heart attack, in intensive care and at death's door. (If Updike wants to save him for a quintet, the last available possibility is a heart transplant.) The physicality of the story, the sense of Angstrom's body, its hungers and aches and pains, is simply superbly realized. The outline of his inward and spiritual development, beginning in the pure cold-sweat funk of fear and trembling, and ending with acceptance and a kind of peace, is likewise overwhelming. The world beyond memory and his fingertips comes to Angstrom, as it does to most of us, by "the news," most often delivered by means of T.V. Updike is precise in time and wonderfully accurate in his recapitulation of public events and their impact on Angstrom. These are important; for all four books were conceived of as a kind of time-capsule chronicle of the times. This is especially interesting in that Updike comes as close to living a sheltered life, a life in a cave, as any major writer of our times. The world wherein so many of his generation have been forced to live, to sink or swim, comes to his mainly as "the news." Which is to say he and Angstrom may (maybe not) make too much of it all. He does these pieces, not set pieces, but living tableaux, very well indeed and adroitly manages to overcome the great danger of sounding like a checklist.

Use of current events as the impact on Angstrom puts Updike at risk, in this peculiar literary day and age, of being uniformly judged as "politically correct" or not by reviewers to whom politics matter more than art or truth (life). Widely reviewed, *Rabbit at Rest* has passed the test. As critic Jay Parini, writing in a slick magazine appropriately called *Fame*, argues, in defense of Updike's work in spite of earlier lapses from grace ("his weirdly blinkered essay about the Vietnam War"), "Updike like so many writers, is smarter in his fiction than in 'real' life." Continuing, Parini welcomes Updike back to the fold: "As Rabbit Angstrom, in late middle age, is forced to deal with, for instance, his son's gay friend, Lyle, who has AIDS; with his son's addiction to drugs; with the general filthy mess

that America, through greed and benign neglect, has become; one senses his growing political (and, of course, spiritual) awareness of things." I am happy to be able to report that Updike is a lot better writer than Parini and others credit him with being, and that Updike's elegiac portrait of America, seen and experienced by Angstrom, is a lot more solid and subtle than Parini's view of it. He and Angstrom both are too intelligent and decent to equate virtue with intelligence and the spiritual with the "politically correct."

This is a fine, rich, powerfully imagined novel, abundant in its details, ample in its rewards.

George Garrett's most recent novel is Entered From the Sun, published last fall by Doubleday.

'Something Like a Final Ordering'

by Daniel James Sundahl

Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman
by Paul Mariani

New York: William Morrow;
519 pp., \$29.95

In the seventy-seventh of *The Dream Songs*, John Berryman writes, "these fierce & airy occupations, and love, / raved away so many of Henry's years." The pervasive tone of Berryman's life and writing, spanning the tired, mad, and lonely years from 1914 to 1972, is that of religious despair; somber and violent, the emphasis is on the grotesque dark night of the soul rather than the immaculate light of salvation. In works now taking their place in American literature, including *The Dream Songs* (which won a Pulitzer); *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*; *Love & Fame*; *His Toy*, *His Dream*, *His Rest* (National Book Award); *The Freedom of the Poet*; and *Recovery*, Berryman—arguably one of the most gifted and trenchant poets of the post-modern generation—evokes a world of psychological schism. His "occupations" record the autobiographical quest of a deeply spiritual man for religious security against the back-

ground of chaos, disorder, and destruction, of a life raved away in alcoholism, hallucination, and revelation. Berryman does not, however, merely exploit his personal anguish; instead, with colloquial intimacy, he deals with the predicament of persons in a world who have suffered not only the loss of God but the loss of themselves. Berryman's courage compelled him to record with clarity and frankness his own spiritual malignancy, until at last—tired and exhausted, living with the apprehension that God's patience too had been exhausted and the promise of salvation withdrawn—he let go, jumping the one hundred feet from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis.

As Paul Mariani makes clear, John Berryman was a man of scruples and snares, disciplining his life only to indulge and binge. His conscience was delicate but lax; and the combination of the two more easily disturbed and ruined him. Berryman thus makes for engaging comparison with his contemporary Thomas Merton: both were students of Mark Van Doren at Columbia University; both were occupied with literature and religion; both were sensitive to the cacophonous noises of an absurd society, which drove them into alienation and unorthodox ways of living; both had strong contemplative minds, lived long hours in solitude, and came in time to be touched by a truth outside the ordinary limits of human vision. In their own distinctive ways, both have left us a theology of creativity, an immense power too great to be fully comprehended at this brief temporal remove.

Mariani himself is a man of judgment and scruple, accepting the goods of Berryman's life but making sense of it as another poet would. Mariani's own poems read at times like the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, the soul falling away from its scruples into snares, the conscience excoriating itself through penance, the persona transformed at the poem's end until the next appearance of sin from which a new spiritual advancement proceeds. Few poets today are engaged in such profound endeavors, staying "true to the facts—the literary remains—which he or she keeps finding, trying to make sense of it all in something like a final ordering."

Dream Song gathers an unsettling

rush and pace in its final third, suggesting Mariani finished the book under the constraints of editorial time. Had he given the book a forced symmetry, however, the whole of the text would be untrue to the whole of Berryman's life—a life spent in search of a center. Berryman's poetry is the only residue in which such a center is to be discerned; and that canonical terrain has yet fully to be charted.

Berryman the poet was, as seems common today, a serial autobiographer. The personae in his major works—Anne Bradstreet, Henry, Alan Severance—are, as Mr. Mariani makes clear, composites of Berryman's own experience; their subjective responses are his responses. *Dream Song* traces the process of self-definition, blending the personalities and the ponderings, until the acquired voice or voices in the writing merge into something like a composite total mind learning to live with its history. The question that seems to override that history is whether America needs persons of Berryman's talent—or, for that matter, whether America needs to be reminded of their ordeals. Our mythology is filled with winners and with dreams of winning. Far too seldom do we hear the incantations of defeat. America, which feeds the spirit, also starves it, driving it to eccentric and egocentric extremes. The tragic undersongs of our poets' lives, from Anne Bradstreet to the present time, remind us that the dream is torn; the modern and postmodern generation of poets, the middle generation, are as much aware of the difficulties in creating poetic identities as the first generation was: "We are on each other's hands / who care. Both of our worlds unhand-ed us. Lie stark" (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*).

The mad, nervous songs that issue from this misplaced middle are sung by outsiders: persons at the borders of common experience, alienated figures whose voices nevertheless carry truth in their assertions. Mariani throws light on the swerving, staggering, slantwise life of John Berryman by implying that Berryman's ego-flaunting bullying is also his vulnerability; to see the drunk staggering, reeling, vomiting in the back of a taxi is to see many of our own actions and impulses; yet we also see a Berryman offering direct addresses to

the Lord. Berryman is neither Mariani's hero nor his *doppelgänger*; neither is he a specimen to be carved up for psychoanalysis. He is, to Mariani, a fallen figure possessed by narcissism, jealousy, hate, lamentations, love, and faith.

Becoming an American poet of some eminence, and then retaining that eminence, is difficult enough; finding admirers who have disinterested relation to the work itself, as opposed to trivial disciples, is essential to poetic survival. Mariani is a fervent admirer of Berryman, but also a realistic one; he combines the aggressions in Berryman's life with the aggressions in the poems. A case needs to be made for representing such a life in detail. Does John Berryman actually merit so exhaustive a biography as this one?

In his preface, Mariani refers to a "bracing community" of writers who understood Berryman's "difficult greatness." It is interesting in this respect to compare a portion of John Haffenden's *John Berryman* with a portion of Mariani's *Dream Song*, both of them having to do with Dylan Thomas's death. Haffenden writes: "He called at the hospital on Monday lunchtime, when Thomas happened to be unattended for a moment, and found him dead. Careering off to tell the nurse, Berryman met John Malcolm Brinnin (who had been in attendance all the weekend and had just slipped out for a moment) and demanded accusingly, 'Where were you?'" Haffenden slights Berryman's grief, writing that it is "certainly true that Berryman exaggerated his intimacy with Thomas, with whom he was in fact comparatively little acquainted, but it was less from self-seeking shallowness than from a strong sense of identification." Mariani portrays Berryman as more honor-bound and with an intense sense of grief: "At 12:40 the following afternoon—November 9—Berryman arrived at St. Vincent's to find Dylan unattended. As he looked at Thomas, he realized with a shock that something was wrong. He shouted for a nurse, who appeared immediately, and then realized that Thomas was dead. As Berryman walked out into the hall, he ran into John Malcolm Brinnin, the man responsible for organizing Dylan's American tours, just returning from lunch. Hysterical, Ber-

ryman screamed at him for abandoning poor Thomas, and then staggered out of the hospital."

The point is simple: Haffenden's dead subject has been killed off, or at the very least deprived of emotional and creative energy, even before the leap from the Washington Avenue Bridge. We are clearly more informed about Berryman's understanding in the Mariani version.

In *Dream Song*, Mariani describes how a poet in our time achieves a dimension sufficient to make poetry that will matter. This is done, he shows us, not by the poet's discarding or escaping from his own personality to assume the personality of a poet, but by accepting it. Berryman did not live a consoling life, but, being Berryman, he had no other alternative than to "go haltingly." Thus, the biographer who walks alongside should not be a transformer, fancifully making Berryman the man into a timeless, metaphysical grand master seated austere at his desk. Mariani affirms Berryman to have been one more perishable human being who encountered his perishability in poems. That seems in itself to be significant.

Daniel James Sundahl teaches English at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan.

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The Man Who Would Be King

by Gregory McNamee

Captain Sir Richard
Francis Burton

by Edward Rice
New York: Scribner's;
522 pp., \$35.00

He called himself an "amateur barbarian," but his comrades in arms called him "that devil Burton" or, more often, "the white nigger." None of the epithets mattered much to their subject, for Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), junior officer in the Indian Army, had no time for petty indignations. He was too busy playing out the life of a hero in what Rudyard Kipling called "the Great Game," conquering the world on England's behalf. In doing so, he became an inspiration for generations of schoolboys who marched into the jungles and deserts and trenches in the service of the Empire.

Burton's shadowy life has long eluded biographers, although many have tried to capture the man in words. Fawn Brodie published a suitably swashbuckling account, *The Devil Drives*, in 1967, and it ranked for two decades as the best life of Burton generally available. In the intervening years, however, English and American readers have learned a great deal more about the effects of far-off adventures. They now have a superb retelling of his fascinating life in Edward Rice's book.

Burton, Edward Rice tells us, was far from a model youth. The son of an English officer billeted in France at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Burton grew up as a street gangster, bullying the locals with knife and sword, seemingly bound for an early grave. He was also uncommonly intelligent, able to master languages and sciences in a few weeks of study. His despairing father, able to foresee a brilliant future for his child if only he would settle down, sold off the family's possessions to buy Burton a commission in the Indian Army, paying £500—a sum approaching \$25,000 today.

Burton made his way to India and was promptly absorbed by the strange cultures he found there. Rather than observe them from afar, in the manner

of his fellow officers, Burton haunted the bazaars and ashrams, learning Hindustani, Sanskrit, Urdu, and a half-dozen other languages and dogging the masters of as many native religions for instruction. Within months he was inducted as a Hindu Brahmin, a member of India's highest caste; a Sufi master, the first Westerner to have penetrated that elegant and once-secret society; and a Shi'ite Muslim, a devotee of the doctrine of *taqiya*, or strategic dissimulation.

Burton saw no contradiction in honoring three separate religious traditions, adding them to the Kabbalism, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, and other Judeo-Christian mysticisms he had studied as a youth. What his fellow officers thought of the now-turbaned, darkly tanned, and long-bearded Burton we already know; he had "gone native" and was no longer part of the club.

But English practicality won out over English snobbery, and Burton was allowed to roam throughout India as he pleased, a full-fledged spy for the Empire.

Burton kept extensive notes on his linguistic and religious studies, but wrote very little about his period of espionage. One of the great contributions of Edward Rice's book is its reconstruction of the shadow years, during which Burton probably indulged in religious and political assassinations, calming himself with a steady diet of *cannabis* and opium. After months of drug-induced visions and secret travels, during which he coined the term "extrasensory perception," he had played India out. It was time to move on, weeks ahead of the bloody Sepoy Mutiny.

Burton proceeded to Arabia. Disguised as a Shia pilgrim, he smuggled himself into the holy city of Mecca and, apparently without regard for the grim consequences should he be caught, entered the Black Stone of the Qaaba, Islam's most sacred shrine. He then wandered to Europe, invaliding himself to the beaches of Normandy, where he captured the attention of a young Englishwoman, Isabel Arundell, a devout Catholic who would become his wife.

But Burton was not quite ready for domesticity. In 1857, in the company of Captain John Hanning Speke, he set