

£10,000 for his enthralling narrative *Schindler's Ark*.⁵ There can be no doubt that the story of Oskar Schindler is one of the more remarkable to emerge from the Second World War. A Sudeten German, he moved to Cracow in 1939 for purely commercial reasons. He was a swindler, a drunkard, and a womaniser. And yet, had he not been these things, he would not have been able to rescue hundreds of Jews from the concentration camps.

Keneally is quite understandably fascinated by this story. And he writes a very vivid book about it. But a narrative is all it *is*, laced with anecdote. "I have attempted to avoid all fiction . . . since fiction would debase the record", he writes, in his foreword. The story is so important to him that he has shrunk from the task of turning it into a novel.

Schindler is conceived as a very competent jour-

nalist would have conceived him, not as a novelist. There is nothing wrong with this. *Schindler's Ark* is not a novel. It is a highly competent, workaday piece of reportage. The feeling is therefore irresistible, not merely that it was odd to give it a prize for *fiction*, but, much more important, that it represents a great lost opportunity. Presented with the bare outline of Schindler's career and character, the reader finds it too odd to be fully comprehensible. He remains a two-dimensional character because Keneally describes him so realistically. Had he been a character in a Graham Greene fiction, Schindler might have seemed more real. And we might have come closer to understanding the fundamentally theological paradox of his nature: that all his petty vices were serviceable for the cause of good; that in the ghastly world Schindler inhabited with such a buccaneer mixture of heroism and the gambling instinct, good could grow out of evil.

⁵ *Schindler's Ark*. By THOMAS KENEALLY. Hodder & Stoughton, £7.95.

The Dream Hunter

On John Berryman—By MARY ELLMANN

JOHN BERRYMAN was one of those poets who seem from the beginning to be maimed, and yet manage to externalise their private hurts to the point that they become representative. To make this possible he attached great importance to his dreams; he spent a good deal of time analysing them himself, or telling them to analysts. Not by accident, he wrote as his principal work 385 "dream songs", published in two volumes. These, as he insisted, were not confessional, though as John Haffenden shows in *The Life of John Berryman*,¹ they are full of autobiographical incident. The actuality is mixed up with fantasy about it, and both ingredients are stylised with technical dexterity into several levels of diction and strictly maintained six-line stanzas.

Berryman's wounds were deep and incurable. Even before his birth the prognosis would have been troubled. His mother claimed that his father raped her, then blackmailed her into marrying him. The father's name was not Berryman but John Allyn Smith. When the son was twelve, Smith committed suicide by shooting himself on the front porch of their home. All his life Berryman saw his father in dream or daydream: "That mad drive wiped out my childhood", he said in

Dream Song 143, and "I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave, / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn" (Dream Song 384). In one burst of fantasy he imagined himself smashing his father's genitals. The reason for Smith's suicide was never clear to him, and he questioned his mother repeatedly about it. She was a clever woman, but could not tell the same story twice. Berryman at least briefly suspected that she had killed her husband. There was little that he did not suspect. Caught between hatred of his father and curiosity about him, between love of his mother and suspicion of her, he could not free his mind of either parent. When he wrote a life of Stephen Crane, he attributed to Crane the same feelings he had himself.

Very quickly after her husband's death, Mrs Smith, like Hamlet's mother, married again. Her second husband was John Angus Berryman, and so the boys' names were changed. John Berryman the poet regretted the change all his life. In 1947 he repeated his name 500 times as if by doing so he might find forgiveness for its adoption. He was far from accepting himself under either surname. The pattern of his life could hardly have been more turbulent. At the Kent School, to which his new father sent him, he was a misfit, at least initially all intellect when the school was all sport. One day, badgered beyond endurance by his classmates, he lay down on the railroad tracks before

¹ *The Life of John Berryman*. By JOHN HAFFENDEN. Routledge, £15.00.

an incoming train, and it took three boys to pull him off. Haffenden, who is inclined to be severe, offers self-pity as a possible explanation, but surely to experience persecution warrants self-pity. A few hours later, Berryman managed to ward off the same boys with a promise of no further attempts at suicide. Haffenden calls this persuasion "emotional blackmail." It was scarcely that. At any rate, this attempt to end his life was the first of a considerable number that Berryman made. When he finally jumped off a bridge over the Mississippi at 57, his death seemed the fulfilment of a lifelong intention.

From Kent School Berryman went on to Columbia College and then won a scholarship for a year's study at Clare College, Cambridge. Lonely for a time, he slowly made friends and became engaged to an Englishwoman identified by Haffenden as "Beatrice." She visited him in New York, after he came back from England. But because of the imminence in 1938 of war, she returned to England. A long separation followed,

and in 1941 Berryman met Eileen Mulligan (later Eileen Simpson). He wanted to marry her, so it was a mark of his goodness that he respected his engagement to Beatrice and was reluctant to break it. In 1942 Beatrice released him, and he was free to marry Eileen. A brief happiness followed for them both.

But Berryman was always tense, tense about religion, tense about art. As a boy he had been a Roman Catholic; with the change of fathers he gave up the Church, then later returned to it, then towards the end fell away again, though not without remorse. His early poetry suffered from being excessively absorptive; Yeats was the principal influence, at times almost crippling. Eventually Berryman broke away to evolve a style with interjections and telescoped phrases that out-rivalled Browning's. If imitation occurred it was parodic. No single style was allowed to persist without ironic qualification. The sense of his own incompleteness, and even incoherence, was swept into his verse and offered as a virtue rather than a defect. So in the Dream Songs the main character, Henry, talks of himself as Henry or Mr Bones, in the first, second, or third person, to a friend who is never named. Beyond Henry is the author, who is more than his suffering, laughing protagonist, and who shapes the passionate syntax and intensely organised stanzas.

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THE TALE THAT John Haffenden tells in this biography is the kind that makes the reader wince, like the record of Robert Lowell's life. There are so many breakdowns, so many peaks of excitement. Berryman said his poetry was intended "to terrify and comfort", but in John Haffenden's portrait terror is dominant. One reason for this is that he relies heavily on Berryman's journal, a record of deep gloom. Reading Eileen Simpson's *Poets in Their Youth*,² one realises that Berryman was not all melancholy, and Simpson serves as a useful antidote to Haffenden. Her marriage to him was the first of three, and all, including the third, exhausted themselves. Berryman had many other attachments, and while these too ended in violent disenchantment, at least one—with a woman called Lise—had breaths of enjoyment and exhilaration before the final blasting.

During most of his mature years, Berryman suffered from alcoholism, though it did not incapacitate him, except occasionally, for writing or teaching. He suffered also from psychoses or near-psychoses, including paranoia. What is surprising is

² *Poets in Their Youth: A Memoir*. By EILEEN SIMPSON. Faber & Faber, £10.50; Random House, \$15.50.

that, as Haffenden demonstrates, he had a great many warm friendships. Men took to him and so did women, often at great cost to their peace of mind. He numbered among his friends the leading writers of his time, Jarrell, Lowell, Schwartz, Blackmur, Tate, Bellow. Though he longed to be first among his peers, he was generous with his praise of others' accomplishments.

Haffenden regards Berryman as always frightened. Berryman thought of himself that way, though it must be said that to others he appeared more frightening than frightened. His celebrated arrogance put most people off, yet he could lay it aside when among people he relied on, and was then witty, eloquent, self-possessed. He was well read too, and prided himself on his scholarship and critical power. All his life he was at work on Shakespeare, and theorised about him endlessly. It is unfortunate that Haffenden has little to say about Berryman's ideas, when he is so compendious about personal weaknesses. The biography is clotted with incidents of Berryman's misbehaviour, and yet drunken Berryman, sex-obsessed Berryman, despondency-ridden Berryman brings book after book to completion. We long to see more of his mind and less of his body. Although Haffenden has written elsewhere of Berryman's verse, he has little to say about it here, where its

polish and structure would greatly relieve the impression of immense confusion. He presents Berryman at his most fallible when we long to see him at his most effective.

Where Haffenden is severe, Eileen Simpson is indulgent; where he is awkward, she is light and graceful. We need his sober chronicle, we also need her amusing recollections. As Berryman's first wife, her emphasis is primarily upon him; through him she meets other young poets ("in their youth"). Knowing Berryman intimately, she modifies Haffenden's account—and all to the good. She admits his youthful defects and difficulties, yet conveys compensatory satisfactions. Later she weathered his affair with Lise. Throughout the marriage, and until his death, she remained a confidante. They were married only eleven years, but for that time she seems to have been a good wife, and a cheerful one. She also indicates that he tried to behave well, rejoices when he was virtuous, grieves at his lapses.

In the end, the poets all died "in their youth", a disconcerting comment on our times. But since they are now dead, Simpson can speak freely of them. Perhaps too freely, and yet the book is important for its biographical evidence. Though most of them came to tragic ends, Eileen Simpson shows that they had their dance.

The Pool

To carry daylight to the pool I walk
 Myself in that direction, throwing off
 Its veil of grey with my eyes, hurling back
 Tall hillsides with each step, causing enough
 Space on it for the sky. But as the sky
 Glides up and stops in front of me, I stop
 And look—Somehow my head is only
 A blur itself on the water's edge, my face
 Is darkened by the half-light of this place
 . . . You could remove me just as easily.

I could change nature with no greater power
 Than a short walk, and a switching of my gaze;
 But I see now that my shape is nothing more
 Than a shadow on this world, and its brief day dies.
 I go back to a room where there is room
 For just a mirror—another mirror
 In which I make no difference. This one is deep,
 And in it, stones and earth will not retreat
 For movements of the head, or of the feet.
 Nothing can alter there. And nothing keep.

Alan Brownjohn