



## Prodigal Son

by Fred Chappell

*"Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them."*

—Oscar Wilde

Collected Poems  
by Louis Simpson  
New York: Paragon House;  
416 pp., \$24.95

Louis Simpson stands as an easy example of the poet divided, whose best talents and strongest predilections are at odds with one another. He takes Walt Whitman as spiritual father and his relationship with the figure of Whitman is as troubled and ambiguous as any son's might be with a blood father. He names W.H. Auden as his *bête noire*, although his own best wit and stylishness are closer to

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Auden's nice effects than to Whitman's woolly dithyrambs.

But perhaps it is not the contrast between the two poets that so exercises him. Simpson struggles with a problem of cultural identity; he has for a long time been trying to define what an American is and then to become one. Whitman represents America, Auden Europe. Louis Simpson's father was British, his mother a Russian Jew, and the lad spent his early years in Jamaica, separated from his parents. In his autobiography, *North of Jamaica*, he identifies America as the place where Mummy was, "a place with tall buildings called skyscrapers" where the inhabitants "ate sugar and bananas."

Already in his miniature verse drama of 1949, "The Arrivistes," a character observes: "This European scene / Is like a comedy, each age an act / In one old plot the public know / By

heart." Already in the poem "West" he dreams of "Ranching in Bolinas, that's the life," and in "Mississippi" of rafting down the river with Huck and Jim, "Where old St. Joe slid on the water lights / And on into the dark, diminishing." Already in "Orpheus in America" a sweaty Americanization of European tradition is attempted; "Goodbye to Arcady! / Another world is here, a greener Thrace!"

Yet now when we read the poems of his early period the more European ones seem superior. "The Flight to Cytherea," a homage to Watteau, Baudelaire, and Laforgue, is more successful than "A Farm in Minnesota" or "American Preludes." A straightforward pastiche of Laforgue, "Laertes in Paris," has good moments; the clumsily Yeatsian "The Goodnight" has interesting rhymes, at least; and "The Bird" is as good as most of the ballads

by Bertolt Brecht upon which it is modeled. And among these early poems we spot another mentor, too; "Invitation to a Quiet Life" shows more than a hint of W.H. Auden, and "Carentan O Carentan" is imitation pure and naked.

O Captain, show us quickly  
Our place upon the map.  
But the Captain's sickly,  
And taking a long nap.

Well, what's wrong with that? From whom will a young poet learn if not from the most influential voice of that decade?

Nothing is wrong, nothing at all, if the borrower is gracious enough to acknowledge his debt and to say, as he nowhere does, that once upon a time when he was green and lyric and impressionable the poet W.H. Auden helped to shape the psyche of the organism that calls itself Louis Simpson. He has deigned to praise the youthful Auden for inventing "a compact, elliptical language that was strikingly original" and for being "obscure and prophetic." But he believes that because Auden wrote no confessional poems his work came to lack real substance. "His habitual concealment of his deepest life led him to write in a trivial manner until — at an age when Hardy and Yeats wrote their greatest poems — he was writing light verse."

The review from which I quote these supercilious remarks, "The Split Lives of W.H. Auden," belongs to Simpson's middle period. During this time, the 1970's, Simpson had espoused the notions of poets like Stanley Plumly, Donald Hall, and especially Robert Bly, and believed that poetry had to eschew rhyme and meter and any diction not colloquial. It was to tell dark transcendental secrets of the soul; it was to employ "deep images." He exhibits with ecstatic approval an example from Bly of such stuff: "The lamplight falls on all fours in the grass."

The poem most symptomatic of this middle period is "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain," in which Simpson carries on a plausible dialogue with a statue of this American bard who has troubled his thoughts for such a long time. "Where are you, Walt?" He complains that the dazzling visions of the future America Whitman promised are abandoned and desecrated. "The

Open Road goes to the used-car lot." The mage replies, with a sense of proportion and a humor often lacking in his own poems, that he had not attempted to prophesy or to lay down laws. "I freely confess I am wholly disreputable."

Then the poem breaks down. Some pickpockets and salesmen enter, and then a storekeeper and a housewife are named but not located spatially, and America is unburdened of its "grave weight." This incoherence is concluded with a deep image that Simpson has avowed his pride in: "And the angel in the gate, the flowering plum, / Dances like Italy, imagining red."

The fact that this image makes no sense is, in Simpson's eyes, perhaps the larger part of its glory. He would say of it what he says of Bly's work: "If you are sold on the English department, then this poetry is not for you. You would have a devil of a time trying to explicate it according to the principles of Brooks-and-Warren." But the truth is that it is only in the murkier recesses of English departments that one can find people silly enough to imagine that a poem will be good only so long as Robert Penn Warren cannot understand it.

Beneath his confusions and pretensions there is a streak of thoughtfulness in Simpson, and it is not surprising that he got fed up with the woozy word-games of this period and desired to write poems about *real* reality, the kind of reality novelists write about, those blokes without fancy language, fancy ideas.

So these days we get poems like "Ed," in which a man drinks too much and wishes he had married a cocktail waitress. Then there is "Bernie," in which a free-spirited fellow writes a successful movie. We get lots of poems with stanzas like this one:

She is in the middle  
of preparing dinner. Tonight  
she is trying an experiment:  
*Hal Burgonyau* —

Fish-Potato Casserole.  
She has cooked and drained  
the potatoes  
and cut the fish in pieces.  
Now she has to "mash  
potatoes,  
add butter and hot milk,"  
et cetera.

This is camp. It is almost exactly the

same kind of camp that Simpson finds the elder Auden guilty of writing. Simpson once announced his intention to write real poems about real people who live in the real world. There are undoubtedly real women who assemble real fish potato casseroles, but they are still waiting for their real poem.

The later poems of Simpson and of Auden boil down to a sort of weakly ironic sociology. In his poem "The Foggy Lane," Simpson reports upon meeting a "radical" who "wanted to live in a pure world." He also met an insurance agent who claimed that he needed "more protection." The poet elects to join neither of these opposed forces of modern society, but to observe, instead, nature, "the pools made by the rain, / and wheel-ruts, and wet leaves, / and the rustling of small animals." But he only makes of himself a third kind of case history.

In 1955 I met W.H. Auden at a beer joint called Joe's Chili House in Durham, North Carolina. In the course of conversation he flashed, amusedly, an American academic idiom he had obviously acquired only recently. "What," he asked me, "is your major?" "Sociology," I replied, wondering if that mightn't be the case. He made no comment and I felt that I had not struck the right note. I tried a desperate little joke (Brash Freshman Banters Celebrated Poet). "Or maybe alcoholism," I said. "Well," said he, gazing at me with purblind seriousness, "that's certainly more respectable than sociology."

If, in their later years, Simpson and Auden begin to resemble one another just a little as the infection of sociology makes inroads upon their talents, it may behoove Simpson to show a little more charity toward his fellow *arriviste*. It is only circumstance that Auden is so much the more famous: the best Simpson is almost as good as the best Auden, and his worst is almost as bad as Auden's worst. And like all Americans, native or naturalized, they both have had to work hard to understand what the nation is that they belong to, and what it makes of them.

In this America, this wilderness  
Where the axe echoes with a  
lonely sound,  
The generations labor to possess  
And grave by grave we civilize  
the ground. ◊

# The Deconstructive Lyric

by Paul Ramsey

*"Poetry is certainly something more than good sense, but it must be good sense . . . just as a palace is more than a house, but it must be a house."*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge



## Selected Poems II: Poems Selected & New 1976-1986

by Margaret Atwood

New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 158 pp., \$16.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

## Don't Look Back

by Dabney Stuart

Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press; 64 pp.

Margaret Atwood writes in her poem "Mushrooms":

Here is the handful  
of shadow I have brought back  
to you,  
this decay, this hope,  
this mouth-  
ful of dirt, this poetry.

Also in *Selected Poems II*, in "Five Poems for Grandmothers": "I make this charm / from nothing but paper; which is good / for exactly nothing." And in "Two-Headed Poems": "This is not a debate / but a duet / with two deaf singers."

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Then, one might think, each singer may rejoice in his own singing, however much he mangles the tune, however inept the words, since he does not hear a thing. The singers hear nothing, mean little, and sing long. Some of the singers, with Heideggerian fervor, really mean nothing. Really, if there were a really. As Atwood puts it in "Notes Toward a Poem That Can Never Be Written": "this is the place that will finally defeat you / where the word *why* shrivels and empties / itself. This is famine."

Yes, it is, and an abundant famine, where many poets of our time starve, hallucinate, and insist on their hallucination of starvation.

The subject is despair, including the despair of any genuine knowledge or understanding whatever, the form unbuckled, the verse prose. The suffering entailed is often quite genuine, and I wish to speak charitably, but the aesthetic and moral and philosophical consequences are nonetheless to be justly deplored.

The historical causes and influences are long, sufficiently complex, and deficiently Romantic. The Romantics taught self-expression, the power of the self, the boundlessness of the self; the contemporary bearers of such tidings

write of the collapse and fragmentation of self. Dabney Stuart in "Casting" in his book *Don't Look Back* (the book would not exist if it obeyed its title), writes "teach me to brew / my life . . . / and conjure, and construe / . . . lost selves . . . / to love." I wish a good poet well; the lines are far from the exaltations of Romantic egoism. Wordsworth's "The Prelude," the search for a unified self and self-understanding, is the paradigm for much of contemporary poetry, though without Wordsworth's self-confidence and mastery of blank verse. The search becomes search without any real hope or even intent of arrival.

The Romantics taught freedom from "rules" and from genres, and exalted the shaping power of imagination, the human power that grandly perceives or maybe *creates* the beauty and excellence of its vision. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." "Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?"

Many modern poems vacillate between the grandeur of imagination and its falseness or uncertainty; many others deny the grandeur or any hope: a resultant rule is to write in the one genre, the deconstructive, nonverse lyric.

Kant taught that the mind consti-