

The Wounded Surgeon (Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets. The poetry of Lowell, Bishop, Berryman, Jarrell, Schwartz, and Plath) **Adam Kirsch** Norton 299 pp £17.99

To Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell wrote in July, 1963

“There’s a strange fact about the poets of roughly our age... that to write we seem to have to go at it with such single-minded intensity that we are always on the point of drowning... I feel it’s something almost unavoidable, some flaw in the motor. There must be a kind of glory to it all that people coming later will wonder at. I can see us all being written up in some huge book on the age. But under what title?” (428)

“The Wounded Surgeon” is one such title, not indeed a huge book of the age, but a selective, considered one. It does not, however, involve Roethke, unfortunately; rather it brings us Sylvia Plath. In a book devoted to the poets who rebelled to different degrees against Modernism, this is perhaps curious. Twenty years ago, Jeffrey Meyers, in his “Manic Power”, dropped Bishop but retained Roethke (and Plath). In both cases we are concerned with what Meyers referred to as Robert Lowell’s “circle” and Kirsch labels a “constellation”, in which he seems, rightly, to prioritise the work of Lowell and then Bishop.

His title comes from T.S. Eliot’s “East Coker”

“The wounded surgeon places the steel
That questions the distempered part.”

Kirsch offers this as a good metaphor (as opposed to a “bad” metaphor like “confessional” poetry, where the art is hidden). It is a useful metaphor because it evokes

“the resolve, not to say heroism, that these poets displayed by submitting their most intimate and painful experiences to the objective discipline of art.” (X1)

It is Kirsch’s intention in “The Wounded Surgeon” to turn the focus from the “wounds” to the work. This feted and fated generation is unquestioningly known as much for the “flaw in the motor” that Lowell wrote of to Roethke as for their fine poetry. What Kirsch seeks to do is to provide “biographies” of some of this work. He makes a good job of it.

His thesis is that in Lowell et al we have group of poets who wrestled with and then escaped their poetic father figures, New Criticism leaders like Tate and Ransom, whose influential critical judgements were grounded in Modernism. After apprenticeships of different lengths, they grew the confidence to rebel against

“the principle, laid down by TS Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ that poetry ‘is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality; that ‘it is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting.’” (203)

How appropriate Eliot’s principle is to Eliot! It reminds me of that wonderful 1948 cartoon, published in *Sovetskaia muzyka*, of the stream of Shostakovich clones emerging from the Leningrad Conservatory. (283Fay) Unfortunately, of course, these poets *are* extremely interesting in their emotions and in the events they endured. In fact, Eliot and his Modernists could hardly have chosen more unwisely. The best of this generation of poets were men and women notoriously subject to extremes - manic depression, repression, alcoholism, sexual adventuring, suicidal impulses, etc. – perfect celebrity poets, in fact. This, of course, is the problem. They were bound to betray their graduate intentions. Hence Tate would write to Lowell of the latter’s brilliant break-away volume, “Life Studies” (1959), that the personal details “have no public or literary interest” (734letters). To Tate the dropping of the Eliot mask was unpardonable; he could not recognise a flesh-coloured one. As he said “Your fine poems in the past present a formal ordering of highly intractable materials...” (Lowell defended himself with citing the support for his new work and worrying only that he might have “betrayed the persona you have of me”) 310letters.

We see the flair of their confusions in the moments of biography that Kirsch allows himself. He is even curiously racy at times. So of Lowell

“a hurried engagement to a woman his parents disliked led to a fist fight with his father.” (3)

The “fist fight” in reality seems to have been one blow that floored the father and led to an awful lot of soul searching.

Of Berryman he writes “That the affair with Chris was illicit was, in literary terms, a double advantage.” (110) and of Jarrell “The common

thread running through all his friends' descriptions of Jarrell is that he was not fully adult or fully masculine." (181)

This is to carp. However, one feels on more comfortable ground with Kirsch when he is writing about the poetry, where he offers many valuable insights and sound judgments – after all, as well as being a successful poet himself, he is also a highly experienced contributor to a number of prestigious publications.

His first essay is on Lowell and includes an interesting insight from Edmund Wilson, who wrote that in the second half of the century, “only Lowell and W.H. Auden had forged poetic careers ‘on the old nineteenth-century scale’”. Kirsch uses this to illustrate his point about Lowell’s ambition and he is right to do so, although Wilson might have modulated his judgment had it been made twenty years later. Kirsch goes on to argue

“For the ‘piratical’ - a heedless energy, a doubtfully heroic violence – is the most commanding element in Lowell’s poetry, from beginning to end.” (4)

I am not sure. ‘Heedlessness’, ‘doubt’ and ‘violence’, yes, but not altogether. Like Wilson’s comment, it does not do for the whole career, tidy as that would be.

At any rate, over 61 pages Kirsch gives us some interesting explication, annotation and insight. I would quibble only with his admiration for ‘History’ at the expense of say his last book, ‘Day by Day’. Certainly the former is vigorous and the latter weary. However, when Kirsch writes of “Day by Day” that it is “most memorable as a collection of scattered epigrams”, he offers a judgment, one could argue, more appropriate to “History”. This a book of brilliant lines and “correspondences” (everything is intended as both “intimate and historical”)(47) in search of an editor.

Elizabeth Bishop was not the rebellious student that Lowell or Berryman came to be. However, good poets know their weight in pounds and ounces, and so did Bishop. Her reticence, her restraint, her oblique approach, these were her masks.

With Bishop, Kirsch feels that

“her great poetry demonstrates that experience channelled into symbol, sublimated into landscape, embodied in rhythm and image, can be more effective and more honest than simple confession.” (65)

I do not know where I am with this. Her “great” poetry is great by definition, and it “can be more effective and more honest”, too, but as confession? Bishop herself, as Kirsch notes, was not enamoured of “the personal and confessional” (86). He is arguing here that vision is self-revelation. Perhaps. It certainly fits his thesis – another poet going over the Modernist wall.

Bishop’s initiation into Modernism, “the dominant poetic idiom of her time,” was “through her own reading of the Modernists and the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets they admired.” (67)

Here Kirsch sees the influence mostly in her early poems, whilst pointing out that unlike some of the others Elizabeth Bishop had no Modernist mentor. For example, unlike Lowell, T.S. Eliot did not figure much at all in her public thinking - if the paucity of references to him in her selected letters, ‘One Art’, is any indication.

Adam Kirsch is very interesting in his sense of the development of her own style as she aged. One could quibble at certain specific readings, such as the ending of her brilliant ‘The Fish’ (a rejection “of the imperious, mythmaking imagination of the Modernist masters” – in releasing her venerable catch) or the subtitle of “The Bight” (here “self-pity invades Bishop’s poetry”) (78). Yet Adam Kirsch is never less than interesting in his judgments, and one is inclined to think again, driven by his commitment to close reading.

John Berryman is third up, a fine, troubled poet who had the indignity of being celebrated as a promising writer at the age of forty-five. Kirsch begins his exploration of the poems with that apposite anecdote. All six of the poets in this book were troubled, of course, but somehow the desperation in Berryman looms largest (at least until we reach Plath) because he had a crippling sense of worth and neglect. Kirsch is very good on Berryman.

It is Berryman who perhaps changes the most harrowingly in moving from his early formality through the “ventriloquizing of the past” in “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet”, a highly unusual poem in that it suffers the sexual intrusion of the poet into the hermetic world he creates.

Berryman arrived famously at “The Dream Songs” having ditched his Modernist anonymity along the way. Here Kirsch tells us

“His new poetry would record the uncensored consciousness, the freely rising ideas, before his artistic superego had a chance to change them” (123)

The disreputable Henry, a patchwork of mockery, self-pity, lust and despair” (127) is famously part of a double act with Mr. Bones which, as Kirsch notes, “assures the reader that Berryman’s authorial consciousness is wider than the consciousness of Henry” (126)

Henry is a fine, twentieth century invention, an erudite, comic Beckett hero or, as Kirsch likens him convincingly to the Shakespearean fool in his license (144). However, the problem is that despite such wonderful uneasy moments as “Sonnet 29” (arguably his most popular dream song) the reader ultimately tires of the whole business. Even Berryman wrote of being “self-trapped”. After more than 300, what Lowell referred to as “the relentless indulgence”, takes its toll.

Unfortunately, Berryman’s later work, “Love & Fame” and “Delusions, Etc.” are tired and deflating in contrast to the energy of his inventive comic masterpiece. The poet had run out of masks.

With Randall Jarrell and Delmore Schwartz, Adam Kirsch contributes observant essays on the least showy of the poets here and the two whose poetic reputation, never the strongest, have faded most. Jarrell was a highly gifted critic and a wonderful letter writer, with a strong humane streak (and an occasionally devastating turn of phrase) and good poet. His poems offer a stark contrast to the dramatic flair of his peers

“naivete – reading that is joyful, spontaneous, untutored; writing that imitates ordinary ineloquent speech – would be the cornerstone of Jarrell’s poetics.”

Kirsch is very interesting on Jarrell’s technique. His essays are celebrative and his credo, as he once wrote in a letter to Lowell, is to “write articles occasionally about what I *like* and all the rest can just die quietly without any help from me” (221). One has to balance that with Conrad Aiken’s comment that Jarrell was a sadist and Berryman’s acknowledgement that he “was a terror as a reviewer” (194).

In his poems it is the gentler Jarrell, who depicts victims, ageing women, the lost world of childhood and with particular success, in my view, the innocence of war. Some of his most memorable poetry comes from his war service, with the Army Air Corps, as an instructor of bomber crews. Kirsch quotes these famous lines terrifying in their innocence from “Losses”

“In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school.”

As a poet, however, Randall Jarrell lacked as Kirsch notes the poetic gifts of Lowell, Bishop and Berryman and his later verse never regained the strength of his earlier. Perhaps “The Lost World” was a return to form – and a return to childhood. He died, probably a suicide like Berryman and seven years before.

Like Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwarz burnt incandescently, but more briefly and Adam Kirsch does a service in bringing him back to us. For a good twenty years Schwarz was a player on the literary scene (“God” as Berryman referred to him in 1941). After the appearance of “Summer Knowledge”, a selected poems in 1959, which won the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, Schwarz was already in mental decline and was to do anonymously in a rundown Broadway hotel in 1966.

“In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”, published in 1938, caused Alan Tate to cry, “the only genuine innovation we’ve had since Pound and Eliot” (178) and Lowell, in retrospect and more guardedly “the old new criticism but with a new touch” (472)

As Kirsch has it, Schwarz led the way of revolt by freeing poets from the severe strictures of Modernism. Only a part of Schwarz work deals with poetry, of course, and surely the severe decline in the quality of his work in growing mental illness was, as the author says, from a position lower than that which Lowell, or Bishop, attained.

Nevertheless, Delmore Schwarz wrote memorably in such poems as ‘The Ballad of the Children of the Czar’, ‘Sonnet: The Ghosts of James and Pierce in Harvard Yard’, ‘What is to Be Given’ and ‘The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me’ and generally in the earlier poems before the poetic line turns long and prosy.

Adam Kirsch’s essay on Delmore Schwarz is highly recommended, then, as a reminder of a lost career. A poet of childhood and the colliding

worlds of history and ego, Schwarz' obituary might have been written by his friend Berryman, when he wrote

“I remember his electrical insight as the young man,
his wit and passion, gift, the whole young man
alive with surplus love.” (Dream Song 155)

or Lowell's judgement in a letter, “a much better mind, but one already chasing the dust.” (427)

In writing of Sylvia Plath slips a generation. Her slightly tenuous link is having studied with Lowell at Boston University and being a recipient of elegies by Lowell and Berryman. In fact, Plath and Ann Sexton were briefly students of Lowell's at the same time, though Sexton typically made a more immediate impact. Of Plath, Lowell wrote vaguely after her death, “She used to come to a few of my classes.”

So much has been written about Plath and Adam Kirsch takes us through the territory (the Modernist issue in abeyance). In Plath he is dealing with a greater iconic image even than Lowell (once the favourite cause of “the peanut crunching crowd”) and he does well to ignore the late interminable debate over responsibility for Plath's tragic death (once the ‘T’ word). He focuses on the hyperbole in Plath's finest work, as he puts it

“Not until she embraced the recklessness of her imagination would she become a great poet” (249) One of the victims of her greatness was the father whom she barely knew, who became one of the “malign presences of her enclosed world” (249). Yet Plath was without doubt a fine, and harrowing poet. Her images (“Love set you going like a fat gold watch”) and her nightmares (“Daddy, daddy you bastard, I'm through”) are difficult to erase from the memory.

As Kirsch explains, however, the finest work is the product of the last months before her suicide in February 1963 (237) “As a result, her artistic growth seems to take place in a few violent convulsions.” (237) Ironically – inevitably – Plath like the others in the volume winced at the thought of true confessions:

“As if poetry were some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion.”
(246)

To Kirsch, Plath is a poet lost in her own dark imagination, in the dangerous world she created there. Perhaps the stronger link with Berryman is that Sylvia Plath possessed a serious talent, but ultimately an unenviable one.

At the end, the poet-critic has been touting a straight forward thesis. For the most part he is successful. However, whilst he illustrates the escape from Modernism to a degree, he cannot as easily escape the extraordinary lives these poets led. Their obsession with their work is part of that work. And the life is fed in turn to an obsessive degree.

So, for example, whilst Kirsch is correct to say of Berryman

“None of his contemporaries better illustrates the deeply ambiguous relationship between a poet’s private experience and the public language of art” (103)

He is acknowledging the intrusion of life into art, which undermines the difference between them and illustrates the tendency to see the art and the life simultaneously, a thought that runs counter to his focus on the poems and not the life.

Nevertheless, in the end, what makes “The Wounded Surgeon” such an informative pleasure to read, however, is his genuine commitment to celebrating the work of these fine poets, and another reason for immersing oneself in them again, particularly in the fading Jarrell and Schwarz. (Roethke next time?)

So, one ends, as one began, with Theodore Roethke

“In the long journey out of self
There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places
Where the shale slides dangerously...”

Adam Kirsch’s surgeons found ultimately that their wounds made impossible the “journey out of self”. In this excellent study he shows how they gloriously mired themselves there. Highly recommended.

Tony Roberts

(2845 words)