Louis Simpson: At the End of the Open Road

(1963)

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Genre: Poem collection. Country: Jamaica.

Although American poet Louis Simpson (1923-2012) published twenty books of poetry, the best-known of these is still the fourth, *At the End of the Open Road* (1963). The volume's visibility is a result of its topical criticism of postwar suburbanization and consumerism, its radical departure from the academic formalism of his earlier three books, and by the fact that the book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1964, securing Simpson's reputation as a major American poet.

The title refers to a poem by Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road", in which the nineteenth-century pioneer of modern American poetry suggests that the young sever old affiliations and pursue a new frontier:

> AFOOT and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose. (Whitman 297)

Whitman urges Americans to abandon their conventional domestic selves and enjoy the freedom of travel, physical as well as mental, in order to achieve their dreams. That such optimism was no longer tenable by the 1950s is the central focus of Simpson's ironic response to Whitman's call.

The volume includes twenty-nine poems in four sections. Written in 1959-63, the book's publication coincided with a revolutionary time during which several notable younger American poets (such as Adrienne Rich, James Wright, and Philip Levine, among many others) abandoned formalist poetry of Eliotic difficulty in favour of an easier style and a more personal tone. As Ronald Moran observes, this book relies on "a quiet power generated through restrained diction, loose rhythms, and an imaginative interplay between subject and attitude" (67). Simpson criticizes Californian cultural decline from the point of view of a suburban insider and university professor in poems about his family background and the history of exploring the North American continent. Although not strictly autobiographical, these poems evoke a "we" of the disillusioned generation of Americans who tried and failed to achieve Whitman's dream of iconoclastic fulfilment.

Throughout the volume, Simpson speaks as one who participates in California's success story yet feels alienated as a consequence of the conformist and intellectually stifling environment he lives in. The first section contains four poems that reflect on the period when he started to teach at Berkeley and live in the San Francisco Bay area. "In California" is a complaint in which the poet takes his stance as an outsider who does not really want to belong: "Here I am, troubling the dream coast / With my New York face" (11). The dream of exploring the new

has died out in the postwar culture of quick profit in the real estate business:

> We cannot bear
> The stars any more, those infinite spaces.
> Let the realtors divide the mountain,
> For they have already subdivided the valley. (11)

The modern-day pioneers who reach the West coast "cannot turn or stay" as their only option is to watch the imagined frontier beyond while "the great cloud-wagons move / Outward still, dreaming of a Pacific" (11). The possibility of a new beginning remains imaginary as the development of California's suburbs and valleys becomes a story of material gain but spiritual loss while the myths of the pure American landscape and its unlimited potential have to be re-invented. We encounter a classic quip by an insider about the dangers of suburban ennui and spiritual deadness in "In the Suburbs":

> There's no way out.
> You were born to waste your life.
> You were born to this middleclass life
> As others before you
> Were born to walk in procession
> To the temple, singing. (12)

According to Pavlina Hacova, Simpson utilizes "an ironic tone to emphasize the moral emptiness of middle-class American life" (1478). In "The Redwoods", the giant trees are likened to "great unmarried girls" who "stand at the Pacific . . . turning in our heads the stars and clouds" (13). In "There Is", Simpson ponders the alienation from the city and its people that he feels is robbing him of language as "I seek the word. The word is not forthcoming. / O syllables of light . . . O dark cathedral" (15).

The second section of *At the End of the Open Road* brings together lyric miniatures about love ("The Silent Lover" and "Birch"), imagist experimentation ("The Cradle Trap", "Marine—After Rimbaud," and "The Morning Light"), and testimonies to Simpson's Russian and Jewish family heritage ("Troika" and "A Story About Chicken Soup"). The section closes with a rare formalist nod to Simpson's earlier work in "My Father in the Night Commanding No", an evocation of a nightmarish childhood memory as the ghost of the poet's father

> Has work to do. Smoke issues from his lips;
> He reads in silence.
> The frogs are croaking and the streetlamps glow. (37)

As Thom Gunn notes, the effect of the poem results from the fact that it is at turns "lovely and at the same time sinister" (55) while the familiar setting of the poem is repeatedly disrupted by frightening images of the poet's parents replaying their perennial quarrels from the other world.

The third section contains a single long poem, "The Marriage of Pocahontas", in which the poet rewrites an episode from the *Generall Historie of Virginia* by John Smith in order to sympathize with the uneasy lot of Pocahontas, a Native American woman who decided to give up her "naked ways" in order to join the colonists, embrace the Christian faith, and "marry perhaps an English gentleman" (51). The poem ends on the dream vision of an uneasy and fragile truce between the natives and colonists at the wedding feast as

> [. . .] a wind
> Rushed through the hall, the torches guttered out,
> And the night was filled with sound. (51)

The fourth section contains several poems that return to the social commentary with which the volume began. In “American Poetry,” Simpson argues that he and his compatriots have to face the tradition of the marginalization of poetry in America and try to “swim for miles through the desert / Uttering cries that are almost human” (55). In “The Inner Part”, Simpson revisits the trauma of Americans as victors in World War II who “for the first time in history / [. . .] were the most important people” while priests “Found the heart misplaced, and seeds / As black as death, emitting a strange odor” (56). In “On the Lawn at the Villa,” Simpson juxtaposes European and American cultures, with himself acting as an uneasy judge of America’s material success and cultural ignorance during an imagined meeting with European friends in Tuscany: “It’s complicated, being an American, / Having the money and the bad conscience, both at the same time” (58). “A Farm in Minnesota” is a rare elegy to the disappearance of the farming lifestyle in America as “The Bible, and a sword [. . .] are bequeathed / to children who prefer a modern house” while the disappearing breed of traditional farmers

> rise in the fields of death,
> and are gathered by angels
> and shine in the hands of God. (61)

Whitman is invoked throughout *At the Edge of the Open Road* as a mentor whose democratic and visionary teaching has not been implemented by the subsequent generations. In “Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain,” Simpson’s meditation on the statue of the elder poet turns into a complaint about America’s loss of spiritual direction: “Where are you, Walt? / The Open Road goes to the used-car lot” (64). The very success of postwar materialism implies a negation of Whitmanian freewheeling optimism that is no longer an option for the postwar American:

> Then all the realtors,
> Pickpockets, salesmen, and the actors performing
> Official scenarios,
> Turned a deaf ear, for they had contracted
> American dreams. (65)

Simpson’s view of postwar American development is gloomy as he predicts that the American imitations of European tradition will be destroyed by commercial madness:

> All that grave weight of America
> Cancelled! Like Greece and Rome.
> The future in ruins! (65)

In the next poem, Simpson continues to lament the fated nature of the American experiment as “Those ‘immensely overpaid accounts,’ / Walt, it seems that we must pay them again” (66). William Stafford notes that Simpson’s poems in this book “confront new, grim aspects of America’s formative traditions” by rereading the traditional narratives about colonizing the continent and building the prosperous nation in such an ambiguous way that these “glow under a certain light and reveal odd skeletons” (61). In the closing poem of the book, “Lines Written Near San Francisco”, Simpson paints an apocalyptic vision of the city struck by an earthquake during a visit by the singer Caruso, after which the city rose again from ashes to be “second only to Paris”, while remaining a landscape full of

> [. . .] gas drums
> On the hilltops, cheap housing in the valleys
> Where lives are mean and wretched. (69)

Ultimately, Whitman’s exuberant optimism has backfired and Simpson has no alternative philosophy:

> Whitman was wrong about the People,
> But right about himself. The land is within.
> At the end of the open road we come to ourselves. (69)

This is the crucial realization of the inwardness of the American Dream which has been so often misunderstood in social and public terms. The frontier had closed and the Californians "must remain, to serve the returning sun", in "the land / The pioneers looked for…a murmur of serious life" (70).

Despite the personal tone and autobiographical content of many poems in *At the End of the Open Road*, Simpson is not a typical confessional poet. Peter Stitt contends that the poetry is "personal because it emerges from and expresses a single, central, perceiving sensibility" (663). Simpson explains that "the personal voice is an expression of character [as] something made. The self that appears in the novel or poem has been constructed according to certain aesthetic principles. This version of the self is [. . .] to serve the work of art. The purpose is to create a symbolic life, a portrait of the artist that will have meaning for others" (*A Revolution in Taste* 169-70). As he proposes, "I am going into the night to find a world of my own" (*At the End of the Open Road* 62). The dark vision of postwar America is especially important for the poet to explore as the monoculture threatens to sweep over the nations' idealist foundations while "everyone wants to live at the center" (*At the End* 66).

Robert McDowell argues that the disturbing poems of social criticism that constitute the bulk of *At the End of the Open Road* succeed because they "seem to represent us, the compromised modern tribe, wholly American, full of hope but just waking to the hard news that our national promise has been played out" (159). In the best of the poems one faces, according to David Mason, "deliberately chosen language, a trained ear measuring by lines by intuition and long practice" (504). The appeal of Simpson's criticism of post-war American suburbanization does not lies not in the rejection of the middle-class American dream of a house in the suburbs, a happy family, and a white-collar job in the city. Rather, his fourth book paints a memorable picture of how it feels to be conformist and suburban in California, with material comfort yet lacking recourse to new horizons. Time and again, the poems of *At the End of the Open Road* record Simpson's attempt to "seize the suburban moment, including situations which turn out to be nostalgic, pathetic, and ridiculous" (Flajsar 51). Whitman's open-road vision is not ridiculed by Simpson, it is merely revisited and rejected as a strategy that no longer suffices at a time when many American poets realized the need to embrace new forms and language to accommodate their attempts to define their identities.

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