



## Louis Simpson (1923-)

Jiri Flajsar (Palacky University Olomouc)

Autobiographer; Essayist; Literary Critic/ Historian; Novelist; Poet; Scholar; Teacher/ Professor.  
Active 1949- in United States

Louis (Aston Marantz) Simpson was an influential American poet, editor, critic, and professor whose ironic lyrics written in a conversational tone helped revolutionize American poetry in the early 1960s. A prolific writer, he remained a visible literary presence from the late 1940s until the late 2000s.

Simpson was born in Kingston, Jamaica, on 27 March 1923. His father, Aston Simpson, was a prominent Jamaican lawyer of Scottish descent. Simpson's mother, Rosalind de Marantz, was a Jewish-American immigrant with Russian and Polish roots who came to Jamaica from the United States to act in a film and stayed. Emulating British colonial upper-class conventions was crucial to the ambition of Simpson's parents to win acceptance into the highest social circles, especially since their ethnic background was something to hide in the early twentieth century. When Simpson was about seven, his parents separated, then divorced. His mother left and Simpson and his older brother remained in the care of their father, who later remarried. When Simpson was nine, his father sent him to Munro College, a prestigious English-style boarding school for boys located in western Jamaica. Simpson was never happy at Munro, complaining in his memoir about the "strange idea of bringing up children, to send them away from home and let them be treated harshly, but this was done by the best families in England, so it must be right for us" (*The King My Father's Wreck* 175).

When Simpson was 16, his father died and his stepmother disinherited him. He remembered that his father "had left us [me and my brother] a few hundred pounds—the rest of his large estate went to our stepmother. She had arranged matters so, and the day after the funeral she sent us packing" (167). Having been thus dispossessed, Simpson eagerly turned his thoughts toward his own mother, who "wrote and asked if I would like to visit her in New York" (40), and he emigrated to the United States in 1940. For the rest of his life, no matter how successful he became as a poet, critic, and professor, Simpson would maintain the ironic detachment of an outsider to American culture and society, having known alienation from an early age: "To this day I have retained that sense of difference and excitement. I am still a stranger in America" (106). After settling down in America, Simpson was encouraged by his mother "not to let anyone know that I came from Jamaica—I was to say that I came from England. She did not give a reason but it was obvious: if I said I was Jamaican people would think I was colored" (47). In fact, the notable critic Babette Deutsch made precisely this error about Simpson's ethnic background in her condescending review of Simpson's first book of poems, *The Arrivistes*, in which she considered him a black Jamaican poet who should abandon his uncultured vulgarity in favor of a "healthy coarseness" (Lazer, "Introduction" 2). Unlike many later poets of the Caribbean diaspora, Simpson's attitude to his Jamaican background was defined by his sense of belonging to neither the English ruling class nor to the black underclass, of hovering somewhere in between.

Once in the US, Simpson began studies at Columbia University. Among his notable teachers were the critic Lionel Trilling and the poet Mark Van Doren. He preferred the latter's courses since Van Doren promoted "a love of literature. His teaching was spontaneous—he told you what came into his head, and there was a great deal in his head" (*The King My Father's Wreck*, 49). Simpson's time at Columbia was, however, interrupted by World War II. He joined the US Army and served, from 1943-45, as an infantryman in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. He took part in liberating Western Europe and participated in the Battle of the Bulge. His first-hand experience of brutal fighting later gave rise to important war poems such as "Carentan O Carentan" and "The Runner." During his service, Simpson was promoted to sergeant and received several medals and honors for bravery including the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart (twice), and a presidential citation. When the war ended, Simpson resumed his studies at Columbia and continued to visit Paris for some time, trying to recover from PTSD and enjoying expatriate life in Europe. His military service also cemented his transformation from Jamaican to American; after the war experience, he "no longer thought of [himself] as a Jamaican" (187). However, he never felt at ease in America either, as he admitted: "I'll never be able to understand a large part of the American character, because I didn't go to an American high school" (*A Conversation with Louis Simpson* 102). Nonetheless, Simpson cherished the "three intense years in the Army" as an identity-forging experience that taught him "an awful lot about being an American" (102). Although he remained ignorant of "a lot of instinctive relations between [American] people," this viewpoint enabled him to "see a lot of things from outside" (102).

Simpson returned to New York and completed his BS degree at Columbia in 1948, which he followed with an MA in 1950, and a PhD in 1959. Between 1950 and 1955, he worked as an editor with the Bobbs-Merill Publishing Company. In 1955, he joined the faculty of Columbia University and taught there until 1959. After obtaining his PhD from Columbia, he went on to teach at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was gradually promoted from assistant to full professor. In 1967, he accepted a professorship of English and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he taught until the 1990s.

Simpson had been writing since youth, yet his career as a poet took off only with the publication of three books of formalist, intellectual, allusive poems beginning in the late 1940s: *The Arrivistes* (1949), *Good News Death and Other Poems* (1955), and *A Dream of Governors* (1959) contain traditional lyrics about the horrors of war and the failure of postwar America to deliver its promise of an idealized paradise. The war poems are permeated with a sense of lost youth and naivete, as in the sinister exposure of war's horror in deceptively peaceful ballad format of "Carentan O Carentan":

There is a whistling in the leaves  
And it is not the wind,  
The twigs are falling from the knives  
That cut men to the ground. (*Collected Poems* 24)

In "Orpheus in America", Simpson complains about the cultural barrenness of America in the voice of the Greek prophet, claiming that America has become "a desert with a name" as it has failed to forge the ideal culture and progressive society the pioneers hoped for. Simpson's Orpheus considers that America "begins antiquity" while the American poet's own "Arcady / Has turned to stone," and, ultimately, the corrupt and failed continent "darkens like a lapse of memory" (93). Overall, Simpson's early style was received well for its technical ingenuity and skillful irony" (Lazer, "Introduction" 2), while it lacked thematic originality. Simpson's status as a major conservative poet was reflected in his co-editing, with Donald Hall and Robert Pack, of an influential anthology of young formalist poets under forty titled *New Poets of England and America* (1957), which later contributed to the publication of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), a rival anthology of avant-garde American poets whose free-verse work went against the grain at the time.

Reflecting the growing tension between formalist and avant-garde poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, notable American poets such as Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, James Wright, and many others abandoned their formalist style in favor of a more conversational tone and form. Simpson's poetry, too, changed in this period: the shift from the academic formalism of *A Dream of Governors* to the free-verse meditations of *At the End of the Open Road* (1963) could not be more radical. In the fourth book, which secured his reputation as a major poet-critic of American culture and won him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1964, Simpson repeatedly evokes the ghost of Walt Whitman against the backdrop of postwar California's cult of materialist conformity. He cannot help "troubling the dream coast / With my New York face" (*At the End* 11), while his suburban, middle-class status in the West is portrayed as a situation in which the poet is fated to waste his life (12) as he tries to "swim for miles through the desert / Uttering cries that are almost human" (55). The problem for Simpson is the trauma of having to come to terms with the materialism of the postwar age while looking for lost connections to the European artistic tradition. This is a difficult undertaking since being American after World War II equals "having the money and the bad conscience, both at the same time" (58), as his conformist fellow Californians

[ . . . ] the realtors,  
Pickpockets, salesmen, and the actors performing  
Official scenarios, [ . . . ] contracted  
American dreams. (65)

As Robert McDowell has noted, *At the End of the Open Road* is a major book in Simpson's career not only due to its radical formal departure from the formalist predictability of his earlier work, but also due to the fact that "no other book of poetry spoke so clearly for its time while leading the way to concerns that would dominate the ensuing decades" (160). Seamus Heaney admired Simpson's new style, as it "was able to give the high cultural and the colloquial equal credence, able to get at life and still keep up a literary play", arguably because of Simpson's identity as "somebody who had internalized a traditional British-type curriculum and then broke free of it as if it had been a chrysalis." Heaney also admired "the way the closed form/open form debate played itself out in [Simpson's] work" (qtd. in *Stepping Stones* 113).

Peter Stitt describes the second phase of Simpson's poetry, which lasted from *At the End of the Road* to the 1970s, as a period during which Simpson abandoned the detached tone of his early work in favor of a more direct, personal "concern with the way this sensibility reacts to and interacts with the society that surrounds him" (663). During the rest of the 1960s, Simpson published little poetry, with the exception of his *Selected Poems* (1965), which featured new work such as a meditation on the US space program's effect on the self:

How easy to be anyone, anything but oneself!  
The metal of the plane is breathing;  
Sinuously it swims through the stars. (179)

A final, third phase of Simpson's poetry began with the publication of *Adventures of the Letter I* (1970) and lasted into the 2000s. His late poetry is notable for its use of a wise, generous view of America, and for Simpson's frequent returns to the past and to his family stories. According to Stitt, Simpson's late poems "empathize more directly with his fellow 'foot soldiers' and their ordinary 'human suffering'" (664). Although Simpson still wonders, with acerbity, "whether writers can live peacefully in the suburbs and not be bored to death", he increasingly smooths the rough edges of his attitude by admitting that he, too, is part of the

conformist suburban game:

And the kingdom is within you . . .  
the hills and all the streams  
running west to the Mississippi. (*Collected Poems* 218)

In another poem, the speaker reconciles himself with the traditional alienation of the poet as a prerequisite for writing, since “to love and write unrequited / is the poet’s fate” (374). At the same time, Simpson rejects the inevitability of the conclusion that “the art of losing”, that Elizabeth Bishop immortalized in her poem “One Art”, is very hard to come to terms with since

the things we care about  
are suddenly disappearing  
and that they always were. (*Struggling Times* 11)

Simpson’s numerous literary awards include a literature fellowship (Prix de Rome) from the American Academy in Rome (1957), the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1964, and Guggenheim fellowships in 1962 and 1970. Although his work after the 1960s gradually fell out of favor with poetry anthologists and critics, a small, devoted following of mostly fellow poets has remained. As Bruce Bawer noted in his obituary, Simpson “could be critical of America, but he always criticized it out of a deep, palpable love, in poems that make poignantly, stirringly clear his powerful lifelong attachment to the American idea” (“Louis Simpson R.I.P.”). Simpson was married three times, and had a son from his first marriage and a son and a daughter from his second. He died in Setauket, Long Island, New York, on 14 September 2012.

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