

Arts & Letters

FIGURES OF SPEECH: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson. By R. Jackson Wilson. Knopf. 295 pp. \$24.95

Were there ever authors less interested in, or more aloof from, sordid material considerations than Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman? One can only hope so. According to this iconoclastic study, Emerson & Co. appear to be the direct ancestors of the most ambitious contemporary writers on the make.

Wilson, a professor of history at Smith College, challenges the cherished myths about an innocent golden age in American writing. The period from the late 18th to mid-19th century, from Benjamin Franklin to Walt Whitman, coincided, Wilson argues, with the establishment of a literary marketplace which allowed writers to make money—"sometimes lots of money." Wilson's argument is that writing, like any other work, is molded by its social and economic setting and that, in this period, the principal setting for writing became, precisely, the marketplace.

Wilson's indictment of the new capitalist ethos appears, in some ways, to be nostalgia for the more intimate connections between audiences and writers that had existed under patrons and patron-like institutions. Starting during the late 1700s, writers contemplated an audience unknown and anonymous—a "mass" as it began to be called. This "mass audience" induced in writers fantasies of alienation and artistic solitude, even as it drew them toward the new marketplace's offerings of profit and celebrity. To add a final paradoxical twist, when it first became possible to earn considerable wealth as a writer, the members of most literary circles considered the making of money "a low motive indeed."

To resolve this paradox, Franklin and Whitman, Washington Irving and William Lloyd Garrison all fashioned "figures" or images of themselves as transcendent writers, truthseekers unmotivated by trade. Emerson clothed the writer in the borrowed spiritual authority of the minister—even as he was writing advertisements for his work and arranging lectures for

which he personally hawked tickets. Worse than any hypocrisy, Wilson finds, is that the writers' arrogant claim of autonomy led them to just that: As literary writing improved through the 18th century, Wilson judges that its value to society decreased. While Franklin still wanted to motivate readers to action, Whitman was a mere observer, a voyeur "caught in an esthetic isolation for which auto-eroticism" would be the best symbol.

Wilson hopes to take writers out of a nebulous and timeless realm of "creativity" and return them to their historical setting. Yet there is something curiously ahistorical about Wilson's enterprise: He no sooner issues than forgets his caveat that "no writer is *only* a creature of the market." He never relates writers' involvement with the market to their other involvements—with their class, family, personal relations, or politics. Even Dickinson's poetry, which she never published, is taken, with little evidence, as her admission of the foreboding strength of the marketplace upon her. Wilson's accomplishment is to have cleared up one simplification about American writers—only to replace it with another.

COLLECTED POEMS: 1937–1971. By John Berryman. Edited by Charles Thornbury. Farrar. 348 pp. \$25

DREAM SONG: The Life of John Berryman. By Paul Mariani. Morrow. 519 pp. \$29.95

SELECTED POEMS. By Randall Jarrell. Edited by William H. Pritchard. Farrar. 112 pp. \$17.95

RANDALL JARRELL: A Literary Life. By William H. Pritchard. Farrar. 352 pp. \$25

Randall Jarrell (1914–1965) and John Berryman (1914–1972) were poets of the "middle generation." They followed the great modernists—W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound—who had, in Pound's phrase, "made it new." But where the modernists had shaped great impersonal myths, this middle gen-



John Berryman