

Into Poetry

The Poem in its Skin
by Paul Carroll
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By LOUIS UNTERMEYER

Essentially—and this is one of its chief merits—*The Poem in its Skin* is an intensely personal book. Personal and persuasive and provocative. The antithesis of the usual collection of academic judgments and finicky-precise appraisals, it is a frank, almost improvised, exploration in what is still open poetic territory. Carroll's method is direct and arbitrarily straightforward. He makes it clear in a disarming foreword to the reader: "Let me stress one thing. I am neither a critic in the formal sense nor a literary historian."

Having established his position—or, rather, his refusal to adopt a fixed stance—Carroll opens his volume of ten chosen poems (followed by an essay on each) with John Ashbery's "Leaving the Atocha Station." He introduces this prime example of free-wheeling dadaism by admitting his initial bafflement. "Clearly much of it sounds like a crazy quilt of images from the unconscious of the poet... The most obvious trait is the general sense that the reader has wandered into somebody else's dream or hallucination." But Carroll doesn't stop there. He goes on to suggest the tangential puns and possible parodies of modern poets implicit in Ashbery's disjointed and disruptive lines. Level after level is probed for multiple meanings; apposite as well as opposite readings are offered; the kaleidoscopic images are brought into something like a focus and the fragments into something like a form. "Whatever 'Leaving the Atocha Station' might mean, the poem clearly encourages what looks like total freedom... One of the ways in which such freedom is made available is of course through the reeducation of our natural preconception that a poem will in the end reveal only one coherent or organic unity. 'Leaving the Atocha Station' reveals at least five or six separate 'poems,' and more no doubt exist." I cannot say that I am completely convinced, but I am, as I indicated, persuaded and even half-ready to agree.



Louis Untermeyer is one of America's best known poets and anthologists. He has been Poet in residence at Harvard, Iowa and Michigan and served twice as the U.S. delegate to international cultural conferences. His latest book, *The Pursuit of Poetry*, has just been published by Simon and Schuster.

After illuminating Ashbery's obscurities, Carroll proceeds alphabetically to examine key poems by Robert Creeley, James Dickey, Isabella Gardner, Allen Ginsberg, John Logan, W. S. Merwin, Frank O'Hara, W.D. Snodgrass, and James Wright. I wish I could be enthusiastic about all the exegeses and extrapolations. But they are a mixed lot of immediate perceptions and superfluous interpretations. Creeley's "A Wicker Basket" is a case in point. The poem is an amusing bit of light verse, tart in its hip idiom—"So that's you, man, / or me. I make it as I can." Carroll almost succeeds in building it up into an analysis session, torturing the fun out of it, ending with an absurd linking of Creeley and Keats.

Carroll is (or seems to me to be) equally maladroit in his amplification of Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals." Dickey's is a charming fantasy, a serious whimsicality which is both grim and comforting and altogether alluring. Carroll follows it with a five-page "essay" entitled "The Smell of Blood in Paradise," quibbles about the poem's unnaturalness and its discordancy, is troubled about—of all things!—its scansion but, at the end, grants its originality. "I doubt if anyone will soon forget the poem."

On the other hand, Carroll's reading of Isabella Gardner's sharply rhymed "The Widow's Yard" is both acute and adroit. One need not agree with him—in a generous appendix he shows that both Robert Bly and John Logan differ with his interpretation—but there is no question that his is a provocative portrayal, a delicate dissection of the attitude of two women to life and to each other.

Two high points in the volume are the pages devoted to Allen Ginsberg and John Logan. The Ginsberg poem, "Wichita Vortex Sutra," with Carroll's glowing commentary, is obviously the more memorable as it is also the more important. With all its excesses it has a Whitmanic force and a passionate drive that comes straight out of Ginsberg's seemingly inexhaustible energy—the energy and the excesses being an integral part of Ginsberg's appeal. That the poet's prolonged mantra fails does not mean that his poem is a failure. "What matters," writes Carroll, "is that the poem embodies and sustains throughout the statement of Ginsberg's complex desire to assume the function of poet as priestly legislator and as Baptist announcing the dispensation of peace, compassion, and brotherhood for all Americans."

Logan's "A Century Piece for Poor Heine" is almost overwhelmed by the long accompanying gloss. His is an unconventional, Freudian, and somewhat lopsided portrait of Germany's greatest lyric satirist. As author of the two-volume *Heinrich Heine: Paradox and Poet*, I condone Logan's errors in fact, although I do not always sympathize with his reasons for making them, and I applaud Carroll's scrupulously balanced summary of the actualities.

I think Carroll made a mistake choosing Merwin's "Lemuel's Blessing" for explication. He stumbles through the poem which admittedly bewilders him. He admires the "lonely grandeur" and "the authority of individual lines and images." Yet he confesses it remains an enigma, leaving the poem in the mystery "which it clearly asks to remain." He could have done better with other Merwin poems, particularly "One-Eye" or "The Drunk in the Furnace" or "In the Night Fields" or, perhaps best of all, "White Goat, White Ram."

I also think Carroll fails to be convincing, although he tries hard, about Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died." Purportedly an off-the-cuff elegy for the singer Billie Holiday, Carroll finds it excellent not in spite of but because of its trivia and ugliness. "What makes 'The Day Lady Died' a poem, it seems to me, is the nerve evident in the very act of writing it... To the reader who may object: What prevents anybody from doing the same? I am afraid that my answer might be unsatisfactory: O'Hara's poem was the first. Think of it as an existential act in itself."

Carroll is at his best with W. D. Snodgrass. "April Inventory" is not my favorite Snodgrass poem; I could pick half a dozen richer and more far-reaching poems from *Heart's Needle* or *After Experience*. But Carroll makes a good case for his choice. Praising Snodgrass' complete candor, he says that "April Inventory" performs "one of the immemorial functions of poetry: it exercises

an evil spirit by bringing it into the clear, hard light where the spirit stands finally revealed for what it is." I believe that Carroll overstates the poet's ironic, self-flagellating "skulking," but he shows how cleanly Snodgrass' idiosyncratic voice comes through, witty and sad, brusque yet tenderly touching.

The follow-up of James Wright's "As I step Over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor" is flatly a disservice, an unsatisfactory extension of a perfectly satisfactory poem. Swamping the unpretentious twenty-line poem in more than three hundred lines of prose, Carroll explains Wright to death. Nevertheless, Carroll's heart (plus, most of the time, his mind) is in the right (no pun intended) place, and the result, as elsewhere throughout the essays, is never less than penetrating. One may quibble with his choices and ask why there is no Goodman, Kinnell, Levertov, Merrill, Hollander, Howard, Simpson, Sexton, Swenson, for example. But, after all, this is Carroll's book. Objectors can compose their own volumes.

Carroll concludes his ten major exhibits with a kind of causerie entitled "Faire, Foul, and Full of Variations," a rambling but refreshing fifty-seven page resume of the more interesting entrances and departures since 1962. Like the rest of the book, it's not to be skipped.

I touched the fingertip
You put upon my lips in letters,
It read like my name,

I thought to wait until your voice
would frame its syllables;

I tasted of the silence in your smile's
photograph,
I had faith the shaded eyes were melting
in the sun of feeling for me,

I ate of the generous nod in your eyes
I read a darkness to come
we could discover as lovers;

Ah, lover, of distances,
Only when death comes between us
Will you really be happy.

Anne Cserr

old Xeno
walked at night
old Xeno
walked at night
along the sea
and fell asleep
near the drunken brine
at dawn
he arose,
breakfasting
with the lilies
at noon
he climbed a sunbaked, dusty path
to
his favorite precipice—
lunching on
the songs of hoopoes
and
draughts of zephyr
at sunset
he walked back down to
the sea—
and sat in the warm foam,
knowing at last
that he was prepared to die

D. Nowicki

Oldest Building

The oldest public building in the United States is the Palace of the Governors, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, built in 1610.

Daniel Webster, secretary of state, issued at President Harrison's direction, an order prohibiting political activity by U.S. employees March 20, 1841.

An Indian attack wiped out about one third of the Virginia colonists, March 22, 1622. Nevada passed a six-weeks divorce law, March 22, 1933.

Ferdinand Foch was appointed supreme commander of the allied armies, March 26, 1918. Russia announced renewal of Russo-Japanese fishing pacts, March 26, 1943.

George Washington signed the act creating the U.S. Navy, March 27, 1794. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, March 27, 1933.