

Roger Hunt Carroll: Puritan Aesthete

“Liberty — what crimes have been committed in thy name!” Erasmus wrote, having in mind the political, not the cultural, consequences. But much the same could be said of ‘free verse’. The century that has just ended and which has seen the triumph of *vers libre* everywhere has produced several interesting writers who happened to write in verse, but very few great ‘free verse’ poets (perhaps only one, T.S. Eliot). As I see it, the reason is that poetry is very closely related to song and indeed Greek ‘lyrics’ were ‘lyrics’ in the pop song sense. Even the speeches of Athenian dramas were delivered in a sort of sing-song which is why, oddly to our ears, Aristotle classes drama as a form of poetry.

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/are sweeter” the Duke says in *Twelfth Night*. I have always understood that what the Duke meant was not that ‘silence is golden’ but that the really exquisite melodies do not make their presence felt too strongly. And this applies very much to the poetry of Roger Hunt Carroll since the author, who one gathers received some training as a pianist, has a very good ear indeed. He does not so much write verse as compose in words, or rather groups of words, in the manner of Debussy or indeed one of his own creations, the *Girl at the Piano*:

*Listen to her as she wanders in and out
Of black and white symmetry beneath her fingers.*

The style is generally restrained, the tone grave ranging from the lyrical to the satirical. Sometimes Mr. Carroll introduces a colloquialism which is all the more effective because it sticks out from the background. In *Four Winds* we have a decorous formal opening:

*The four winds blow from every corner
in private patterns written in mystery script;*

and a little later :

These winds bump me from pillar to post

where the descent into the mundane is a perfect matching of style to situation since violent winds do shatter people’s composure.

The style's the thing for Mr Carroll apparently, just as it was for Verlaine and Valéry. But is not *Girl at the Piano* a kind of self criticism?

*She can't stop her virtuosity: she plays for hours
With technique critically esteemed; but nowhere
In such an astounding display is her music's point:
It seems she's more skilled at variations without a theme.*

As a self-respecting aesthete (of a certain type) Roger Hunt Carroll would probably deny having any kind of a 'message for the world' — 'Let the world go hang, or find its message for itself!' he would probably say. But, if one looks carefully enough, one can discern a fair amount of substance beneath the elegant play of sound.

I require from a writer, if not necessarily a message, at least a stance, a manner of coming at life that is distinctive, honest and original. Carroll certainly *has* a stance, a 'world-view': it is an eminently Schopenhauerian one since it presents life either as a sort of shadow-play (*The World as Idea*), or as a theatre for destructive, assertive egos (*The World as Will*).

Many of Mr. Carroll's characters inhabit a sort of limbo:

*Everything is in masquerade,
everything disguised by total dark
on whose fringe the sleeper wakes.*

In another poem, the speaker passes before a sequence of mirrors

*each mirror reflecting a scintillant show
of the one before it, each one somehow
oddly the same, withholding my secret self
I cannot see change from glass to glass...*

The theme of 'Who am I?', so typical of twentieth century poetry, is not just a conceit but, for Carroll, acquires a very real urgency and poignancy:

*Believe me when I say I would break this glass
into a million shining shards simply to know
if my reflection hidden here is as valid as my flesh.*

Other personages in Mr. Carroll's poems do not so much take refuge in aestheticism as find their true reality there — Schopenhauer himself believed that it was only while contemplating abstract beauty that one could achieve temporary relief from the clutches of the Will. Life, Roger Hunt

Carroll seems to be telling us, is at best a slow, somewhat melancholic but for all that occasionally beautiful courtly dance:

*The followers do not touch in their sad saraband
But slow they file in shadowless afternoon,
Burnt with the sun, and dancing, as though gracefully
Their steps might break all time...*

Even the shepherd in *Pasture Nocturne* is quite the opposite of what one might expect. Instead of enjoying the ‘simple life’ far from the distractions of the city, he is “*weary of their [his sheep’s] wanderings, bored by [their] dissonant bleating*”. He ends his day not by returning to the innocent pleasures of family life like Gray’s ploughman, but by “*fixing his hard stare on the silent sky*” and wondering

How he could create chic patterns from such a show of stars.

So the shepherd turns out to be, at heart, an urban aesthete!

In several poems (*Eleventh Hour, Rite of Suttee*) the characters actually die but even when they do not they are generally in the process of phasing themselves out of active existence. No one is happy and yet no one is sad, at any rate not desperately so. They do not quite accept their fate with philosophic calm but do not rebel against it either: their attitudes remind one of those of the human beings in Hopper’s paintings who always look as if they are stranded in life. Take the ‘lady of the house’ in *July Night*, rocking herself all night “*cuddled in her creaky swing, cushioned in the warm dark, alone*”. Had I written the poem, I would have had the widow either end her life before dawn came, or embrace dawn as heralding a new and completely different kind of life. She does neither and the poet, typically, leaves her there swinging in the rocking chair in a state of suspended animation.

In Mr. Carroll’s poetry men and women are ruthlessly torn down from their pedestals and made to bite the dust like the pitiful *Flute in Default* whose

sad music spills out of a twisted embouchure.

Or *Bit Part*

treated like a dunderhead waiting in the wings”

for

the final unctuous curtain call ...

exposing you, me, this foolish play, and all you claim to be.

Even Eleanora Duse, by all accounts the greatest actress of her day, is shown at her lowest ebb:

*when this compulsive travesty ends, she'll go home alone
To endlessly rinse her ragged, bleached-blond wig –
All the while shrieking at her mascara-smeared mirror:
“I am the Duse, goddam it! I am the Duse!”*

The only ‘successful’ characters seem to be those few who have the grace and courage to bow out gracefully like the Mexican god Quetzalcoatl who has “*shed his sacredness like a snake sheds his seasonal skin*” but, in the poet’s eyes, is all the more to be admired for having done just this:

*Fools: they’ll never grasp
the power or magic of your genetic tomfoolery.*

In the majestic *Rite of Suttee* the widow achieves greatness by, in true Schopenhauerian fashion, renouncing the will to live voluntarily. She decides to join her husband in death without the slightest illusions about either him or the prospects of an afterlife:

*dismissing love that exists no more;
(...) it’s enough for her to burn with him in his ascent,
burning in her own fragrant, innocent intent.*

There is in some of these poems a lack of empathy for the human species which I must admit I find somewhat disconcerting. The human tragi-comedy elicits neither sighs nor tears from Mr. Carroll, only a certain vague astonishment that people can be so foolish and that the human condition is so irremediable. “*I have no choice but to accept*” as one of Mr. Carroll’s characters puts it — and this more or less sums things up. Mr. Carroll has at least the merit of regarding himself with the same unflinching gaze that he directs at his motley fictitious characters.

One could, I think, say that Roger Hunt Carroll belongs to a poetic tradition that goes back at least as far as Milton, its greatest exponent, and which one might characterise as ‘Puritan aestheticism’ — a contradiction in terms but this is what gives the writing its inner tension. Most aesthetes incline to self-indulgence and narcissism: the nineteenth century *fin de siècle* poets (Verlaine, Wilde, Thomson, Dowson et al.) drowned themselves in a glorious sea of absinthe and tears with incense replacing spray. But one or two were made of sterner stuff: Lionel Johnson with his ‘ivory coldness’ is closer to Mr Carroll and one might (just) extend the epithet ‘Puritan aesthete’ to Emily Dickinson and certainly to T.S. Eliot, both of

whom were products of a solid Presbyterian ‘East Coast’ background like Mr. Carroll himself.

The twentieth century was a self-consciously anti-Romantic era, with poets like Auden and Spender pretending to admire gasholders more than cherry trees in blossom (though I bet in reality they never did). The weak point of Romanticism is self-indulgence and, while rejecting almost everything else in Romanticism, contemporary poets have retained this trait, indeed exacerbated it, since writers today have a ‘freedom’ with respect to form and metre that the Romantic poets themselves never possessed. But Roger Hunt Carroll is a would-be classicist — ‘would-be’ only because it is probably impossible to be truly classical in our profoundly dislocated society. Mr. Carroll with his restrained but sensitive diction would have fitted perfectly into the Roman Augustan era. He has a genuine liking for genres no longer practised like the ‘elegy’, the ‘threnody’ (what exactly is a threnody?) or, for that matter, the ‘lyric’ itself in its original sense. It is also curious, though typical, that Mr. Carroll reveals his inner feelings more openly in the poems written in French (significantly entitled *D’Un Journal Intime*) than he does in the poems written in his native language — it may be that he requires the inevitable distancing that a foreign language gives to show his true colours. Whereas most of the ‘love poems’, if one can call them that, written in English seem to concentrate on the cinders rather than the flames, he has given us the exquisite *Chanson de Rose*, worthy of Ronsard or Apollinaire, which ends

*Peut-être une petite part des larmes de cette nuit sombre
Refera ma rose blanche desséchée —
Ô permettez à sa fragrance de revenir, de me donner
Un souvenir de la belle dame ravissante.*

So, taken all in all, what’s the verdict? Roger Hunt Carroll’s poetry covers a vast range from elegant neo-classical ‘elegies’ to biting contemporary satire. I have some reservations about such collections as *Paumanok Nocturnes* or *Hymns for Persephone*, well done though they are, because I am not convinced that Mr. Carroll really believes in, and thus cares about, Persephone or Paumanok — or maybe the trouble is simply that I don’t. At the other extreme, some of the satirical and confessional pieces are a bit too close to the bone for comfort (though this is intentional). There remain, however, enough poems of the ‘middle ground’ which are both extremely pleasing formally while at the same demonstrating a very distinctive and original ‘take’ on life, to put Mr. Carroll amongst the very few notable poets I know of writing in English at the moment.

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