

COMMENT

TRAVELING & LIVING

Traveling on Credit, by Daniel Halpern. The Viking Press. \$6.95 hardbound; \$2.25 paperback.

Living at the Movies, by Jim Carroll. Grossman. \$12.50 clothbound. \$4.50 paperback.

Every so often a first book of poems is published which so impresses one that one feels compelled to speak out, if not in defense, at least in appreciation. *Traveling on Credit* by Daniel Halpern is such a book. In it are poems, lines, titles, forms which illustrate perfectly ideas that I have been concerned with in my own poetic life, and which provide substance for not only a short review like this but an entire article.

Poetry always must renew itself and the poet must renew the language for his contemporaries, thereby redefining all previous poetry. *Traveling on Credit* does this perfectly. It is the definitive redefinition of modernity. In it Daniel Halpern does for his generation what one can imagine Edgar Guest did for our parents'. It is a definitive text and should be required reading in all M.F.A. writing programs. It is poetry that would reassure any college level student that he too can be a poet. *Traveling on Credit* abounds in classics along lines that could inspire people who have never read a poem (or even *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*) to write. A book for everyone. One can only marvel at the consistency of the voice.

A first book usually abounds in borrowed diction that bothers. How refreshing to come across a poet with absolutely no voice at all. One can only marvel at his complete disregard of any ideas in favor of simple description. Take *The Eblinic Lapse*, the first work in the book; one would be hard put to say too little about it from the pretty 19th century vocabulary in the opening lines through "I ride teak trains" (Why do more poets use alliteration, it's so poetic) moving with relentless tunefulness to the last line closing on a down-beat with a rhyme. I am sure Mr. Halpern composes while listening to "the Carpenters". But I have said too much.

Over Campari During Mouloud is another one. In this ditty we find "socco" rhymed with "Morocco" and other wonderful accessible exotica like "Campari" which everyone can recognize thanks to its advertisements in *The New Yorker* where they might conceivably have read this poem. Or is it *Esquire*? What a relief to read a poem about Morocco without mention of pederasty, the unwholesome and all pervading North African vice! You and I and the readers of *Esquire* could go there and not even notice it. Remember, this poetry has an A

rating because it mentions prostitutes. Really, it is for everybody. This everyman aspect cannot be underestimated enough. Nice guys who write are rare in poetry where weirdos if not psychopaths of dubious virility get all the attention. Everyone likes a nice guy, and Daniel Halpern is one heck of a nice guy. However aggressive his sexuality may seem on the surface, it is always couched in subtle metaphor and fine Marlboro country images like this from *The Initiation*:

We climbed down through the high-hung country like men,
Stiff, proud,
Full initiates of that far valley.

This is not the poetry of a closet queen or panty-waist but a serious man who understands normalcy. Like a real scout he tolerates ambiguity and sees the "fun" in oppressed minorities. The gay hero of *Seldon's Poem I* "laughs" and similarly the "Negroes" of the poem *Central Park* play music or "... Negro tapped his foot" to the music. In an age of race riots what a wonderful thing it is to celebrate happy musical "Negroes" tapping their feet. In *Spanish on the Block* we find

The slim women who walk weird beats
With tropical skirts sealing their thighs
Smudge the air with Puerto Rico Oils.

Wishing he'd used the word "dusky" to describe their otherwise scaly skin is beside the point. Mr. Halpern's understanding of women and the female body places him in a league with no one I know. Black whores, white whores, Latin whores, even whores who speak Latin abound. This guy must be quite a dude with the women who are as the poems demonstrate either "sluts" or good women, those who wait in the harem for their men, who

... would fake
Understanding so he
Could go to bed happy

WOMEN

Any man could appreciate a poem like *Pastimes* where a man's home is his castle, where the little woman knits and agrees with him that he is a "genius".

Could poems first published in *Parisian Review*, *Saturday Review* (the Vox Populi's Acropolis), *The New Yorker* (the Philistine *Chapel*), and *Mademoiselle* ever be of questionable mediocrity? This point should be mentioned, I think, because it best illustrates what a serious middle-class student can accomplish in poetry by staying in school and earning a

degree no less in the writing of poetry. One can live quite snugly on grants and by teaching with occasional subsidy from *Madamoiselle* and the 57 varieties of other acknowledgments and dedications as Mark Strand would testify. Someone should write a testimonial to Mark Strand. Does Mark Strand also write poems? Would anyone ever read a first book if it didn't have a Mark Strand seal of endorsement? May I be the first to congratulate Mr. Halpern for not establishing a precedent which would probably inspire sales even if he does have an M.F.A. in creative writing backing him up already. I think *Traveling on Credits* is worthy of a Ph.D. because it is really what creative writing programs are all about.

I would also like to praise Mr. Halpern on his brave title, *Traveling on Credits*, which begs all manner of derogatory permutations from an unsympathetic critic (like, to travel with Daniel Halpern is not to arrive). I guess there won't be many unsympathetic reviews though; he's been published in almost every magazine that reviews books. But why would anybody dislike this cozy stuff anyway. It is *gemutlichkeit* at its best. It is the best easy listening poetry around. I predict great success for Daniel Halpern and his first book—it takes Rod McKuen into the stratosphere.

The great thing about the work of a genuine poet is the atmosphere which it creates in the mind of the reader. This is as difficult to define as it is impossible to miss. It has a great deal to do with technique and with style, but only in so far as they are an integral part of the feeling and thinking that go to make up a poet's work. But it is as equally difficult to fail to realize it, when a writer turns out to be a genuine poet. Jim Carroll at twenty-five is a genuine poet just as surely as Rod McKuen and Rod Taylor are not. In reading Jim Carroll's first full-length book of poems *Living at the Movies* it is quite evident to me that he fully understands the nature of poetry because he perceives and follows the nature of his own life, and with that recognition of his nature, he is able to write about it.

Mr. Carroll's poems are populated with people he has loved and crowded with those who love him. His poems are irrigated by friends by his own kind and consanguinity. He is original without being unique. His technique, however, is in advance of his maturity. At times he is capable of spoiling a good poem by a precious or very sentimental line or phrase, like "and our life is that rusted bottle . . . pointing north", in *The Distances*, but never of trying to make one out of any emotion that is not an integral part of his own deep feeling.

The poems seem roughly to group themselves into "general" poems usually longer, where a subject is viewed from many different angles and states of consciousness, and the "specific," where something is seen whole in a flash as in *A Fragment*:

When I see a rabbit
crushed by a moving van

I have dreams of maniac computers
pertinent to our lives.

In them the vision is so strong that there is no craftiness and the medium of poetry gives way to an idea that can't wait for doctoring-up to be born a flawless declarative sentence. That fast kind of poetry is always the best kind of writing. I think it's spiritual without being churchy, as some of the longer poems seem.

Literature is not a competition. Yet Jim Carroll will invariably be compared by some critics both with some of his contemporaries and with their predecessor Frank O'Hara. Carroll's poems are not so perfect as O'Hara's nor is his vision so intense. While there's nothing extremely deep in the experimental and phenomenological sense, his range is wider than O'Hara's; his feelings not deeper, but made general, as in *Silver Mirrors*:

A horse moves
this weekend
into our living room

he says, "Oh, quickly
form a ring around me
as to prevent the merciless
insane hounds from attacking
my weakened legs in attempt
to drag me back to the icy
palace in the wintry regions."

"Then you are the one they sent?"

"yes"

"Very clever, did you bring it?"

"yes"

There is not one awkward word or tacky locution disturbing the exquisite poise and flow. I'm reluctant to quote specific lines because when the poems are best they make such complete sense that to quote excerpts merely cheapens the effect.

On the whole Jim Carroll has the sure confidence of a true artist, meaning he is confident about the right things. He is steeped in his craft. He has worked as only a man of inspiration is capable of working, and his presence has added great dignity to the generation of poets of the 'seventies to which he belongs. His beginning is a triumph.