

LETTER TO THE POETRY EDITOR

Concord, Massachusetts
October 7, 1957

Dear Mr. Carroll:

I want to call you on that "gray-flannel poets" piece.¹ I didn't see the *Western Review* anthology (and wasn't in it), so I don't pretend to defend whatever poets were there, nor do I want to wish myself out of your own listing or defend myself from the tag. I don't like it, be sure, but what really bothers me is your promiscuous grouping of poets who are so various. I agree with you that there's too much "able, academic, anemic" verse floating its way into publication, and I'm damn well for the kind of guts that seem to me to be represented in Isabella Gardner's poem. If I were clearer what you meant by "adventure" and "gaudiness" I might vote for these things too.

But to set these virtues up against the multiple strawman of your list does seem to me to be dubiously honest, and disastrously un-useful. What Nelson Algren gets said about critics on page 97 seems to me to apply here, as a matter of fact. Your list of gray flannel poets live on very different streets, I'd think: Hecht and Merrill are highly elegant, Hollander sometimes appears in the guise of university-wit, for instance, and Hall seems to write from a mind committed to scholarly disciplines. And so on. Maybe these literary addresses seem to you to rate flannelizing them (or others), but I can't in any case see how Merwin gets measured by the same tape. That he is brilliant I agree, but *Green With Beasts* is unlike any other book on your list: it's full of the riskiest kind of symbolic poems (like "The Station" or "The Mountain"). I suppose I want to defend Merwin because I feel closer to him than to any other poet on your list; I guess I think we're trying to get at some of the same things. And, as a tactic, I think we're after poems which metaphorically deepen under surfaces that seem perfectly calm. Or perhaps I should say that I

1. "Notes on Some Younger Poets," by Paul Carroll. *Chicago Review*, Autumn 1957, 11(3), 76-78.—Ed.

sometimes try for that, as a way to get around superficial readers, the ones that won't get saved, "as St. Mark says they mustn't" if you remember Frost's "Directive." Maybe Merwin doesn't feel this way, but I suspect he does, and I offer the evidence of M. L. Rosenthal's recent review of *Green With Beasts* in *The Nation*—maybe in August sometime. Or look at Merwin's "Deception Island," which got the wide reading of *New Yorker* publication about a year ago—yet is so brilliantly deceptive that I'm fairly sure most readers (and maybe some editors) didn't read what it *said* under its accomplished surfaces.

Merwin may well be an extremely professional poet, one that doesn't write for the "joy or the hell of it," (at least in the sense you seem to mean), but his poetry is no more like most of these poets you list than is his refusal to be a teacher. And even teaching, I'd like to claim, may well be a kind of protective coloration for poets. It has plenty of dangers, God knows, but those dangers are so obvious that recognition of them is in itself a way to the kind of freedom a poet needs. Or again, to offer evidence beyond my own intuition (and disaffiliation from a college except in those few hours a week when I must make money to feed this houseful), I submit Roethke, Kunitz, Wright—Washington, NYU, Minnesota. And how how how could you leave Wright off any listing at all? Here's another guy that gets printed by a university press and all that, but who writes impressively about where the mortar is cracking out of the seams at levels far below any ivory tower.

Probably this ought to be some sort of answering article instead of a letter, but I don't work that way, somehow, and even in all this mid-Monday ramble I thought I'd rather write you directly. Especially since I like your over-all selection of poems, and am glad to be included. Indeed, I'm with almost all that you ask for and claim for (difficult as it is), but I did want to say my reactions to that unjust lumping of so many poets in an oversized grayflannel suit.

Sincerely,

PHILIP BOOTH