

Helen Adam and Jess Collins
April 7, 1957*

Memoirs of Our Time and Place

With what relief we come, away from the agons of poetic striving, to the home of Poetry itself. The agons, the competitions, but then too the straining after effect to win the poem. The agony, “the intense suffering, extreme mental or physical pain, death struggle” to win the wreath, the critical acclaim, to be valuable, to be worth our while. The blessed John Bunyan told us, did he not? the tale of this Vanity Fair. What a hold it has over us. I have my engagements there. O what a market it is! What excitements of the marking up and the marking down, of what do you think about whom or how. What a venom we hear on the air to devalue the Pound in spite of the poem, what rumours reach us to establish the mean, what a ballyhoo and pass the hat of a cause to keep great poetry on its feet. Haven’t I myself just now shown up Mr X or Mr Y for what they are or what they aint? Will they survive, or have I made a killing in the market today? What style shall I set to show best my expectations? Does the cut of the critical flatter my form? Will the greedy gospi gossips

*At the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Association, 555 Chestnut St.

furnish my fame fortunately?

With what relief we come, here of all places, home. Is that a hearth I see with even a corner for me to hear from? or is it now about a fire on the hearth? or under a greenwood tree where a woman has a poem to tell, a charm where old lore of the tree thrives? Is it a man or a bird alight out on a limb of sense catches us listening or gathers us in, feathers ourselves, to the tale of a parrot? Who are Helen Adam and Jess Collins the living sons and daughters of?

When first I Helen Adam heard
My soul delighted like a bird.
And when I second heard aright
She showed me wonders of the night.

What time is it?
It is the hour of the sublime.
It's Story Time.

She cast aside all my false care.
She cast a spell of my naked nature
Of the poet's delight in unlashd rapture
To touch terror out of the angelic air.

It is the hour where the fame of the poem is not the sense the poet gives of his own stature but the report he brings of a created world, it is the hour we did not deserve. We have only, whoever we are, to entertain the idea as it passes. We too like the poet will disappear. Who? Where? What time? It is the time of the opening of the door in the hill. Where? There where she led us astray, where he enticed us to play? Who? Look! all the hosts of the imagination have come to the rounds where we may see them.

Charles Olson
Thursday, February 21, 1957, 8:30 p.m.
San Francisco Museum of Art

Biographical Particulars

Born December 27, 1910 in Worcester, Mass. “Uneducated” (as Olson puts it) at Wesleyan, Yale and Harvard. Taught at Clark, at Harvard (1936–1939) and at Black Mountain College. His first publication 1938, “Lear and Moby Dick” in *Twice a Year*. He has had two Guggenheim fellowships, and in 1952 the Wenner-Gren Foundation grant for Mayan studies.

Notes

Olson begins his Melville book with Promethean assertion: “Loke, father: your sone!” To catch up a fire where it flared up between Melville and Shakespeare—from a primal inspiration at this conjunction Olson has projected in his work a challenge to his contemporaries: for the first time since the generation of Pound, Stein, Williams, with the publication of “Projective Verse” the demand was made for responsibility to the language, the “END of individual responsible only to himself.” Poetry was a process not a memoir. The poet, the maker, was to be responsible to human meanings, forms, discoveries embodied in the medium of speech—to the history of his kind and to the history of man in search of the real world. He was to pursue—Olson here quotes Melville on Shakespeare: “Those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short-quick probing at the very axis of reality.” “When traditions go,” Olson writes in a letter printed in *Origin I*, “the DISCONTINUOUS becomes the greener place.” “If we are to express the going reality from down in you, and me, and any other man who is going for center: ...language has to be found out, anew. . .” In *Twentieth Century Authors*, Olson writes: “I am an archeologist of morning.” One has to “dig” Olson, dig history, dig to the root in language. In *The Maximus Poems* his method resisted mere aes-

thetic appreciation or the enthusiasm engendered by shared attitudes and opinion; it demanded understanding. And understanding meant conversion: out of which a new freedom of response. By temperament protean, Olson in his work brings a multitude of perspectives to the mind, but two—the challenge of reality and the radical demand for language—may be taken for a view of the meaning of his poetry. They arise from the concept of the poem as a primary engagement with the real, a thing as act. “My shift is,” Olson writes in *Twentieth Century Authors*, “that I take it the present is prologue, not the past. The instant, therefore. Is its own interpretation, as a dream is, and any action—a poem for example.” The poem is significant then as any act is significant, and we seek to keep the act “green.”

Background

What characterizes the major poetry of the period between 1935 and 1950 (the period of ideologies and open war) is that it is re-active. Conservative reaction thrived in colleges where professor-poets appeared: Ransom, Tate, Winters, Eberhart; and in the Church where the few poets who were actually conscientious objectors found status: Merton, Lowell, Everson. Individualist reaction thrived in the open city where anarchist-poets came to the fore: Miller, Patchen, Rexroth—these men were major spokesmen against the war, but they were not “exposed,” they were not draftees. The first group allied themselves with the conventions of institutional sanctuary to hold against the politics of action: their poetry is notably within the convention of stress and stanza, their preoccupations moral and metaphysical. Their concept of language corrective, not dynamic. The second group turned to the traditions of the individual against the State, to supernatural and sacramental sanction for the ego. Their poetry is single-voiced: the single voice is that of an obsessive (to meet the obsession of the State) personality. Both the conservatives and the individualists raised as paramount the individual integrity. Their self-images were taken as the axis of reality.

The anarchist-poets emerge as forces (especially here in San Francisco where the professors never took hold) because they exposed themselves: they challenged directly the age. One reads in *Capri-*

corn, in *Albion Moonlight*, in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, the real message wrought out of the depression of the 30s and ripened in the intolerable conditions of the second World War—the protest that could appeal to any draftable dispensable “exposed” young man. It is a painful period: an inconsiderate hatred between the “we” and the “they” (which still appears in the “cats” and the “squares”) is paramount—a channel for communists, fascists, and American demagogues as well as for these anarchist writers. The reality of total human involvement (the image of Adam) we disowned. Outrage and elegiac tenderness (Buchenwald and kindergarten) were the dominant modes.

Dahlberg (*The Flea of Sodom; Sing, O Barren*) Olson took as his “Genius of the Cross and the Windmills.” Dahlberg presents the pure protest; the very excesses of this Jeremiah which had deprived him of a popular following made him a liberating force: he could not mislead. Suddenly (it seemed “sudden”) from the minimum demand of the person where misanthropy had succeeded anarchy came the demand of the Maximus, the figure is that of Man and the poet gives the pre-eminent poet of his generation in the period from 1945 on. What is significant is that his poetry, immune to the dynamics of ideology, had remained and ripened in the wholeness which the Process now demanded for meaning. In Olson’s credo given in *Twentieth Century Authors* we have clearly a break-thru, a new stance. Shakespeare, not Blake, as proto-type? Reality springs from the act and the will—in the “green” fraction of contact.

In the work and dogmas are: (1) How, by form, to get the content instant; (2) what any of us are by the work on ourself, how make ourself fit instruments for use (how we ourself fit instruments for use (how we augment the given—what used to be called the fate); (3) that there is no such thing as duality, either of the body and the soul or of the world and I, (the multiple) by the one (yrself done right, whatever you are, in whatever job, is the thing—all hierarchies, like dualities, are dead ducks....

from “ABCs (2)”:

what we dont know of ourselves
of who they are who lie
coiled or unflown
in the marrow of the bone.

Poetics

Charles Olson's crucial role has been to bring writers back to a consideration of the art. Pound had demanded it in the name of culture, of writing with professional competence. Olson demands it in the name of the stance toward reality, of writing with maximum energy. In "Projective Verse," he proposed a poetry by field composition. The energy of the poem is related to and springs from physical energies: specifically—

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.

In his book *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* what projective verse can be appeared. The new poetry was to investigate the articulations of the line. Olson demanded for the mind the dance of the intellect in the syllables; and the control, the shaping thru the line. For the heart he put it as dogma: the heart dances in the line. Where the intellect shapes. In this concept of a syntax where there is no duality of body and spirit, the organic forces are reflected in the counterpoint of the poem. There is no "body" as there is in closed-form poetry to be inhabited by the spirit of the poem—as a sonnet is inhabited by the poet's. Projective verse is a process. The poet practices it as a science (there is no duality between science and art, knowing and creating). For those of us who had been waiting (circa 1950) for the moment to come when the art of poetry could be turned from personal use and misuse towards a new life, Charles Olson turned the tide. In "Projective Verse" he wrote: "(The stance involves, for example, a change beyond, and larger than, the technical, and may, the way things look, lead to new poetics and to new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.)"