

REVIEWS

Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, Ed. by
Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander.
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Once again, the University of California makes accessible the otherwise scattered materials of one of the most important creators of mid-century American verse. If the fifties are to be looked at as the decade that amounted to an explosion of new alternatives in American poetry, the editing task will be of extreme importance to our knowledge and evaluation of those years. Thanks to this Press, indisputable voices like Creeley, or now Olson, are not only present through their remarkable influence on contemporary poets and college syllabi, but also through the continuing dialogue their texts establish with the contemporary reader.

Now, for the first time, Olson's critical voice is at hand, in all its wide-ranging overtones, from the most influential essays printed and commented again and again, like the fundamental «Projective Verse,» or the illuminating «Call me Ishmael,» to notes, introduction to other poets' works and book reviews. Some unpublished writings from Olson's archive have also been rescued by Allen and Friedlandes, who restricted this novelty of the collection to texts that were prepared for publication by Olson himself, though they never actually came out in print. Thus we have access to the unknown «Mr. Meyer» «The Post Office,» «GrandPa GoodBye» (on Pound), «D.H. Lawrence and the High Temptation of the Mind,» and «Cy Tombly.»

Three of the formerly unpublished texts are mainly autobiographical, personal notes starting with a relative, a friend or an anecdote and developing some kind of brief abstract reflection, deeply rooted, obviously, in subjectivity. This is not, however,

exclusive of the, so to speak, autobiographical writings. When he assumes an attitude of scholarship at its best, Olson is defending a fairly personal view, no matter how widely supported. For him, as Edward Halsey Foster accurately pointed out, the personal is «the only source of reliable judgement»(12). Besides, the personal, as Olson thought of it, necessarily includes the body. Its physics and movement are essential to the thought and perceptions produced through and with them. That is why a «projective» image, a «projective» verse cannot be a portrait of life but an enactment parallel to life, in which mind («head, by way of the ear, to the syllable») and body («heart, by way of the breath, to the line») are one single act, one movement. As we can read in «Human Universe,»¹ included in this *Collected Prose*, «there is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why *art is the only twin life has* – its only valid metaphysic» (p. 162) (my bold).

For many years, Olson's inheritance was avantgarde (in the broader sense of the term). Duncan, Creeley, Levertov and many others consider him an inspiring friend, almost a master. Later, Barrett Watten and other Language Poets rejected such inheritance strongly, although its influence, one might say, is proven by the attack itself and survived it. To Olson, verse was a breath unit, form was determined by or closely related to the body, as much as content was related to the moment and act of perception. All of these mean a decisive presence of the individual writing the poem, which was to be repudiated by the Language Poets' belief in the dictatorship of Language itself, far from subjectivity. Olson's ideas, at the same time, disdain closeness and completeness in the art form. As a transcription of an act, of a movement, any point of departure or arrival is arbitrary and a temporary interruption of what should go on, since one perception leads to another with no possible break in continuity. As such, later tendencies in American poetry returning to traditional patterns and to formalist attitudes disregard «Projectivism» too. Nevertheless, in present-day poets (some of them part of the Language group at a certain point of their career) such as Alice Notley, Clark Coolidge, Nathaniel Makey and especially Susan Howe, Olson's theories are still influential and provide a ground in which to root new progressive poetics. For Mark Doty, this influence of Olson's ideas happens to be ironic, because Olson's «principles, in their vagueness, provided fertile ground upon which younger poets might construct their own aesthetic» (141). It might be that their vagueness, which could be understood as opposition to the neat, clearly-defined principles of logic (we cannot forget the impact of Heisenberg's uncertainty

1. This text, apart from being the main piece in the second book of Olson's *Prose, Human Universe and Other Essays* (1965), was well known to all poets and scholars of American poetics due to its inclusion in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, Grove Press, 1979, undoubtedly the most influential anthology of the second half of the century, edited also by Donald Allen, in that case together with W. Tallman.

principle in Olson's cosmology), is precisely the reason why they provide such a fertile ground for younger poets.

This *Collected Prose* represents the opportunity of handling in just one volume the most important part (only the tip of the iceberg, as Friedlander says) of Olson's immense production. The honest and passionate introduction by Robert Creeley and almost ninety pages of editors' notes complete the book, indebted, no doubt, to George Butterick's sorting and arrangement of Olson's papers, from 1972, when the University of Connecticut purchased them, to 1986. The quantity and nature of the reference books one would need to set about the task of reading without the notes (never enough with Olson) makes them a necessary aid to the texts. With those notes, and with a sound compilation and ordering of the texts, Allen and Friedlander contribute to the knowledge and appreciation of the history of poetry and poetics in the second part of this century, and, what is maybe even more important, to the continuing dialectics (where Black Mountain poets still have much to say), controversy, and creative energy of poetry and poetics today.

REFERENCES

- E. HALSEY FOSTER, *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*, Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1995.
- MARK DOTY, «The Forbidden Planet of Character: The Revolution of the 1950's» in *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, ed. by Jack Myers and David Wojahn. Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.