

TOWARDS AN OPEN UNIVERSE
by Robert Duncan

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I was born January 7, 1919, in the hour before dawn, in the depth of winter at the end of a war. When I think of the hour, from their obscurity the tree at the window, the patterned curtain, the table and chair, the bowl of golden glass upon the chest of drawers are just emerging into view. Sleeping and waking fuse, things seen in an inner light mingle with things searched out by eyes that are still dim. Day "*breaks*", we say, and the light floods out over the land. The shining planets and the great stars, the galaxies beyond us, grow invisible in light of our sun.

The imagination of this cosmos is as immediate to me as the imagination of my household or my self, for I have taken my being in what I know of the sun and of the magnitude of the cosmos as I have taken my being in what I know of domestic things. In the coda of *Apprehensions* the "First Poem" calls upon the birth of life itself in the primal waters and may call upon my birth-hour:

It is the earth turning
that lifts our shores from the dark
into the cold light of morning,
eastward turning
and that returns us from the sun's burning
into passages of twilight and doubt,

dim reveries and gawdy effects.
The sun is the everlasting center of what we know,
a steady radiance.

The changes of light in which we dwell,
colors among colors that come and go,
are in the earth's turning.

Angels of light! raptures of early morning!
your figures gather what they look like
out of what cells once knew of dawn,
first stages of love that in the water thrived.

So we think of sperm
as spark-fluid, many-milliond,
in light of the occult egg striking
doctrine.

Twined angels of dark,
hornd master-reminders of from-where!
your snake- or animal-red eyes
store the fire's glare.

O flames! O reservoirs!

In the very beginnings of life, in the
source of our cadences, with the first pulse of
the blood in the egg then, the changes of night
and day must have been there. So that in the
configuration of the living, hidden in the ex-
changing orders of the chromosome sequences from
which we have our nature, the first nature, child
of deep waters and of night and day, sleeping
and waking, remains.

We are, all the many expressions of living
matter, grandchildren of Gaia, Earth, and Uranus,
the Heavens. Late born, for the moon and ocean
came before. The sea was our first mother and
the sun our father, so our sciences picture the
chemistry of the living as beginning in the
alembic of the primal sea quickened by rays of
the sun and even, beyond, by radiations of the
cosmos at large. Tide-flow under the sun and
moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart,
these rhythms lie deep in our experience and when
we let them take over our speech there is a
monotonous rapture of persistent regular stresses
and waves of lines breaking rime after rime.
There have been poets for whom this rise and fall,

the mothering swell and ebb, was all. Amoebic
intelligences, dwelling in the memorial of
tidal voice, they arouse in our wake minds
a spell, so that we let our awareness go in
the urgent wave of the verse. The riming
lines and the repeating meters persuade us.
To evoke night and day or the ancient hypnosis
of the sea is to evoke our powerful longing
to fall back into periodic structure, into the
inertia of uncomplicated matter. Each of us,
hungry with life, rises from the cast of seed,
having just this unique identity or experience
created in the dance of chromosomes, and having
in that identity a time, each lives and falls
back at last into the chemistry of death.

Our consciousness, and the poem as a
supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a
dancing organization between personal and
cosmic identity. What gnosis of the ancients
transcends in mystery the notion Schrodinger
brings us of an aperiodic structure in *What
is Life?* "the more and more complicated
organic molecule in which every atom, and every
group of atoms, plays an individual role, not
entirely equivalent to that of others."
"Living matter evades the decay to equilibrium,"
Schrodinger titles a section of his essay of
1944: "When is a piece of matter said to be
alive?" "When it goes on 'doing something,'
moving, exchanging material with its environment."

What interests me here is that this picture
of an intricately articulated structure, a form
that maintains a disequilibrium of lifetime,
whatever it means to the biophysicist, to the
poet means that life is by its nature orderly
and that the poem might follow the primary
processes of thought and feeling, the immediate
impulse of psychic life. As I start here,
first with night and day, then with a genesis
of life, and would go forward to the genesis

and nature of consciousness, my mind balks at the complication. It is not that we are far afield from the poem. Each poet seeks to commune with creation, with the divine world; that is to say he seeks the most real form in language. But this most real is something we apprehend; the poem, the creation of the poem, is itself our primary experience of it. We work toward the Truth of things. Keats's ecstatic "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" rises from the sureness of poetic intuition or of recognition, our instant knowing of fitness as we work in the poem, where the descriptive or analytic mind would falter. Dirac in *The Physicist's Picture of Nature* tells us: "it is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit experiment." What is at issue here is that the truth does not lie outside the art. For the experimenter it is more important to have beauty in one's experiments than to have them fit mathematics.

The most real, the truth, the beauty of the poem, is a configuration, but also a happening in language, that leads back into or on towards the beauty of the universe itself. I am but part of the whole of what I am, and wherever I seek to understand I fail what I know. In the poem "Atlantis" I had this sense of the fabulous as an intuition of the real:

The long shadow thrown from this single obstruction to its own light;
Thought flies out from the old scars of the sea
as if to land. Flocks that are longings
come in to shake over the deep water.
It's prodigies held in time's amber
old destructions
and the theme of revival the heart asks for.

The past and future are
full of disasters, splendors

shaken to earth, seas rising to overshadow
shores and roaring in.

Beauty strikes us and may be fearful, as there is great beauty in each step as Oedipus seeks the heart of tragedy, his moment of truth, as he tears as he tears out his eyes and sees at last. But this is a heroic and dramatic gesture and may obscure what I would get at. For in our common human suffering, in loss and longing, an intuition of poetic truth may arise. In the poem "A Storm of White" I spoke from my grief, let grief have its voice, in the loss of a cat, a beloved person of my household. He had died of pneumonia within a few weeks of our moving to a house in the coast north of San Francisco.

A Storm of White

neither
sky nor earth, without horizon, it's
a--
nother tossing, continually in-
breaking
boundary of white
foaming in gull-white weather
luminous in dull white, and trees
ghosts of blackness or verdure
that here are
dark whites in storm
White white white like
a boundary in death advancing
that is our life, that's love,
line upon line
breaking in radiance, so soft- so dim-
ly glaring, dominating.

"What it would mean to us if
he died," a friend writes of one she loves
and that she feels she'll
outlive those about her.

The line of outliving
in this storm bounding
obscurity from obscurity, the foaming
-as if half the universe
(neither sky nor earth, without
horizon) were forever

breaking into being another half,
obscurity flaring into a surf
upon an answering obscurity.

O dear gray cat that died in this cold,
you were born on my chest
six years ago.

The sea of ghosts dances. It does not
send your little shadow to us.
I do not understand this
empty place in our happiness.

Another friend writes in a poem
(received today, March 25th 58)

"Death also
can still propose the old labors."

It is not that poetry imitates but that
poetry enacts in its order the order of first
things, as just here in this consciousness they
may exist, and the poet desires to penetrate the
seeming of style and subject matter to that most
real where there is no form that is not content,
no content that is not form. "A change of
cadence," so the early Imagists realized, "means
a new idea," But idea means something seen, a
new image: here it is the Way, in which action,
vision and thought have their identity.

In the turn and return, the strophe and
antistrophe, the prose and versus of the choral
mode, the alternations of night and day and the

systole and diastole of the heart are remembered,
and in the exchange of opposites, the indwelling
of one in the other, dance and poetry emerge
as ways of knowing. Heraclitus wrote the opposites
or alternates large and imagined them as phases of
a dynamic unity: "God is day, night, winter,
summer, war, peace, satiety, hunger, and undergoes
alteration in the way that fire, when it is mixed
with spices is named according to the scent of each
of them." He proposes, so the Christian
Hippolytus accuses him: "that the created world
becomes maker and creator of itself." *

We begin to imagine a kosmos in which the
poet and the poem are one in a moving process,
not only here the given Creation and the exodus
or fall but also here the immanence of the Creator
in Creation. The most real is given and we
have fallen away, but the most real is in the
falling revealing itself in what is happening.
Between the god *in* the story and the god *of*
the story, the form, the realization of what is
happening, stirs the poet. To answer that call,
to become the poet means to be aware of creation,
creature and creator coinherent in the one event.
There is not only the immanence of God, and His
in dwelling, but there is also the imminence of
God, His impending occurrence. In the expectancy
of the poem, grief and fear seem necessary to the
revelation of Beauty.

Central to and defining the poetics I am
trying to suggest here is the conviction that the
order man may contrive or impose upon the things
about him or upon his own language is trivial
beside the divine order or natural order he may
discover in them. To see, to hear, to feel or
taste--- this sensory intelligence that seems so
immediate to us as to be simple-- given--comes
about in a formal organisation so complicated
that it remains obscure to our investigation in

all but its crudest aspects. To be alive itself is a form involving organisation in time and space, continuity and body, that exceeds clearly our conscious design. "It is by avoiding the rapid decay into the inert state of 'equilibrium,' that an organism appears so enigmatic," Schrodinger writes, "so much so, that from the earliest times of human thought some special non-physical or super-natural force was claimed to be operative in the organism."

There is not a phase of our experience that is meaningless, not a phrase of our communication that is meaningless. We do not make things meaningful, but in our making we work towards an awareness of meaning; poetry reveals itself to us as we obey the orders that appear in our work. In writing I do not organize words but follow my consciousness of - but it is also a desire that goes towards - orders in the play of forms and meanings towards poetic form. This play is like the play of actors upon a stage. Becoming conscious, becoming aware of the order of what is happening is the full responsibility of the poet. The poem that always seems to us such a highly organized event is in its very individuality - "idiocy" the classical Greek would have said - in its uniqueness crude indeed compared with the subtlety of organization which the study of syntax, morphology, etymology, psychology, the range of contemporary linguistic analysis reveals in the language at large from which the poem is derived. The materials of the poem - the vowels and consonants - are already structured in their resonance, we have only to listen and to cooperate with the music we hear. The storehouse of human experience in words is resonant too, and we have but to listen to the reverberations of

our first thought in the reservoir of communal meanings to strike such depths as touch upon the center of man's nature.

Man's nature? Man's speech? Carlyle in his essay *The Hero as Poet* remarked the inherent music of our common speech: "all speech, even the commonest speech, has something of song in it: not a parish in the world but has its parish-accent; - the rhythm or *tune* to which the people there sing what they have to say! Accent is a kind of chanting; all men have accent of their own, - though they only *notice* that of others. Observe too how all passionate language does of itself become musical. All deep things are Song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, Song; as if all the rest were but wrappings and hulls! The primal element of us; of us, and of all things. The Greeks fabled of Sphere-Harmonies; it was the feeling they had of the inner structure of Nature; that the soul of all her voices and utterances was perfect music. Poetry, therefore, we will call *musical* thought. The poet is he who *thinks* in that manner. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature *being* everywhere music, if you can only reach it." This music of men's speech that has its verity in the music of the inner structure of Nature is clearly related to that beauty of mathematics that Schrodinger and Dirac feel relates to the beauty of the inner structure of the physical universe.

The dancer comes into the dance when he loses his consciousness of his own initiative, what *he* is doing, feeling or thinking, and enters the consciousness of the dance's initiative, taking feeling and thought there. The self-consciousness is not lost in a void but in the transcendent consciousness of the dance. "Night and Day address each other in their swift

course, crossing the great brazen threshold," Hesiod sings in his *Theogony*: "the one will go inside, the other comes out." As consciousness is intensified all the exciting weave of sensory impressions, the illustrations of time and space, are "lost" as the personality is "lost"; in focus we see only the dancer. We are aware only in the split second in which the dance is present. This presentation, our immediate consciousness, the threshold that is called both *hero-and-now* and *eternity*, is an exposure in which, perilously, identity is shared in resonance between the person and the kosmos.

In 1950, with his essay *Projective Verse*, Charles Olson called for a new consideration of form in the poem: "instant by instant, aware." "And if you also set up as a poet, *use use use* the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must move, *instanter, on anothr!*" In the poem this instant was the attention of "the head, by way of the ear, to the *syllable*" - the mind was not to be diverted by what it wanted to say but to attend to what was happening immediately in the poem - "With this warning, to those who would try: to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language is to engage speech where it is least careless and least logical. . .and at the same time a quickening of "The *heart*, by way of the *breath*, to the *line*." Here Olson too was thinking of the dance: "Is it not the *play* of a mind we are after, is it not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?" "And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but the *Line*?"

This play of heart and mind we see as the play of life itself in the extension of our

language as it plays in the extension of our lifetime upon the threshold of consciousness between what man is and his *kosmos*, the very fire of Heraclitus upon the hearth where the imagination of what man is and what the cosmos is burns. Our gods are many as our times are many, they are the cast and events of one play. There is only this one time; there is only this one god.

If the sea is first mother of the living, the sun is first father, and fire is his element. Here too death and life, the heat of our blood and the light of our mind, in one reality. That I have seen in poems as the fire upon the hearth, the genius of the household, as if the secret of our warmth and companionship were hidden in a wrathful flame.

Food for Fire, Food for Thought

good wood
that all fiery youth burst forth from winter,
go to sleep in the poem.
Who will remember thy green flame,
thy heart's amber?

Language obeyd flares tongues in obscure matter.

We trace faces in clouds: they drift apart,
palaces of air - the sun dying down
sets them on fire;

descry shadows on the flood from its dazzling
mood,
or at its shores read runes upon the sand
from sea-spume.

This is what I wanted for the last poem
a loosening of conventions and return to open form.

Leonardo saw figures that were stains upon a wall
Let the apparitions contained in the ground
play as they will.

You have carried a branch of tomorrow into the room.
Its fragrance has awakend me -no,

it was the sound of a fire on the hearth,
leapt up where you bankt it, sparks of delight.
Now I return the thought.

to the red glow, that might-be-magical blood,
palaces of heat in the fire's mouth

"IF you look you will see the salamander"

to the very elements that attend us,
fairies of the fire, the radiant crawling.

That was a long time ago.
No, they were never really there,

tho once I saw- did I stare
into the heart of desire burning
and see a radiant man? like those
fancy cities from fire into fire falling?

We are close enough to childhood, so easily purged
of what we thought we were to be,

flamey threads of firstness go out from your touch,

flickers of unlikely heat
at the edge of our belief bud forth.

There is an emotion, a realization, but it is
also a world and a self, that impends in the first
stirrings of a poem. In a poem like "A Storm
of White" or "Food for Fire, Food for Thought"
the voice may seem to rise directly from or to
the incoming breakers that had become a moving

whiteness into which I stared or the flickering
light and shadow cast upon a wall by a fire on the
hearth I had forgotten, waking in the night, still
close enough to the sleeping mind that I dreamed
in what was happening. In "A Poem Beginning
With a Line By Pindar," the germ of the poem
quickenened as I was reading one evening the
Pythian Odes translated by H. T. Wade-Gery and
C. M. Bowra. I have an affinity with Pindar,
but here it was my inability to understand that
began the work or it was the work beginning that
proposed the words I was reading in such a way that
they no longer belonged to Pindar's *Pythian I*: "The
light foot hears you, and the brightness begins:" In
Pindar it is the harp of Apollo that the light foot
of the dancer hears, but something had intruded,
a higher reality for me, and it was the harp that
heard the dancer. "Who is it that goes there?"
the song cried out. I had mistaken the light foot
for Hermes the Thief, who might be called The Light
Foot, light fingered, light tongued. The Homeric
Hymns tell us that he devised the harp of Apollo
and was first in the magic, the deceit, of song.
But as Thoth, he is Truth, patron of poets.

The infant Hermes, child of Zeus and the Lady
Maia - Alexandrian gnostics of the second century saw
Zeus as the One God and the lady as Maya, name and
personification of the Buddha's mother and also of the
Great Illusion - this genius of childhood in his
story resolves: "I too will enter upon the rite that
Apollo has. If my father will not give it me, I will
seek - and I am able - to be a prince of robbers."
First crossing the threshold of the Sun, he steals
a tortoise. "Living, you shall be a spell against
mischievous witchcraft," he says: "but if you
die, then you shall make sweetest song." Then
staring at the shell, he conceives song's instrument:
"As a swift thought darts through the heart of a man
when thronging cares haunt him, or as bright glances

flash from the eye, so glorious Hermes planned both thought and deed at once."

The poet is such a child in us, and the poem, the instrument of music that he makes from men's speech, has such a hunger to live, to be true, as mathematics has - numbers and words were both things of a spell - to dream true, to figure true, to come true. Here poetry is the life of the language and must be incarnate in a body of words, condensed to have strength, phrases that are sinews, lines that may be tense or relaxed as the mind moves. Charles Olson in his essays towards a physiology of consciousness has made us aware that not only heart and brain and the sensory skin but all the internal organs, the totality of the body, is involved in the act of a poem, so that the organization of words, an invisible body, bears the imprint of the physical man, the finest imprint that we feel in our own bodies as a tonic consonance and dissonance, a being-in-tune, a search for the as yet missing scale. Remembering Schrodinger's sense that the principle of life lies in its evasion of equilibrium, I think too of Goethe's Faust whose principle lies in his discontent, not only in his search but in his search beyond whatever answer he can know. Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light finger-tip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring.

This exposed, open form - Projective Verse, Olson named it in poetry - began to

appear in the 40s: with the *Pisan Cantos* of Ezra Pound and *Paterson* of William Carlos Williams, with the *Symphony in Three Movements* of Stravinsky, I began to be aware of the possibility that the locus of form might be in the immediate minim of the work, and that one might concentrate upon the sound and meaning present where one was and derive melody and story from impulse not from plan. I was not alone, for other poets - Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley - following seriously the work of Pound and Williams, became aware, as I was, that what they had mastered opened out upon a new art where they were first ones working. In music John Cage, Pierre Boulez, or Karlheinz Stockhausen seem in the same way to realize that Stravinsky, Schonberg and Webern stand like doors, mastering what music was, opening out upon what music must be.

It is a changing aesthetic, but it is also a changing sense of life. Perhaps we recognise as never before in man's history that not only our own personal consciousness but the inner structure of the universe itself has only this immediate event in which to be realized. Atomic physics has brought us to the threshold of such a - I know not whether to call it certainty or doubt.

The other sense that underlies the new form is one that men have come to again and again in their most intense or deepest vision, that the Kingdom is here, that we have only now in which to live - that the universe has only now in which to live. "The present contains all that there is," Whitehead says in his *Aims of Education*: "It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future. . . . The communion of saints is a great and inspiring assemblage, but it has only one possible hall of meeting, and that is the present; and the mere lapse of time through which any particular group of saints must travel to reach that meeting-place, makes very little difference."