

1975

# Introduction

Thomas R. Whitaker

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In snow and sun  
it files upwards—to where?  
It more than fills  
the painting one might have made.  
It shadows and shrinks  
the person who might have stood  
beneath its reaching.  
It seems to make its own light.  
Let me be like that tree,  
one might have said,  
before the carving  
had come far from the wood,  
before the map was a shoe  
and the branches were made oars.  
That was before  
we could piss in a drawer,  
when snow and sun were tact,  
the tree too personal for words.  
Let me be like that tree,  
putting to rest  
the spring  
and wandering.

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FIELDS OF ACTION / CRITICISM AND POETRY

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### Introduction / Thomas R. Whitaker

Two issues ago we brought together under this heading essays on Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Olson's *Maximus Poems*, a review of Eshleman's *Coils*, and new work by Denise Levertov and W. S. Merwin. In this issue, too, we emphasize the variety of movement that is possible within an understanding of the poem as a field of action.

Sherman Paul here traces further the continually renewed activity that impels *The Maximus Poems* toward a "familiarity difficultly won"—but a "security never attained." Charles Molesworth assesses the equally "American" but quite different improvisatory art of Frank O'Hara. Ronald Johnson's *Wor(l)ds*—from which we excerpt two sections—shows how a poet whose

previous work has richly evoked the verbal landscapes of American and British romanticism can now take the Orphic strain in a punningly Joycean direction. And Kathleen Raine's review of David Jones's *The Sleeping Lord* may remind us that even a poet who is justly called "the last of the bards" can be a modern sign-maker—indeed, a Joycean artificer of verbal labyrinths. David Jones, Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara and Ronald Johnson share few ideological or even stylistic assumptions. But surely they would all understand why Octavio Paz has insisted that, as our century goes on, any work which really counts must be "a form in search of itself."

Finally, Charles Altieri reminds us that the act of reading or interpreting must also involve a continual self-interrogation. He reviews the major theoretical models available to the interpreter, proposes a theory of the poem as act, and tests it by reading "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," one of Wallace Stevens' many poems "of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice."

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CRITICISM / CHARLES MOLESWORTH

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### "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves": The Poetry of Frank O'Hara

Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, as profuse in their inventiveness as they are pervasive in their influence, demand that we attempt to judge their place in American poetry. It is not only because these poems skirt the edges of such contiguous but opposing aesthetic qualities as artless simplicity and dazzling elaboration that they are hard to judge. These poems outline their own territory by operating with a high degree of consciousness about themselves as literature, and simultaneously flouting the notions of decorum and propriety. Just when they seem placed, or placeable, in some historical or theoretical classification, they are off again saying such classifications don't matter, and it's clearly wrong-headed of people to ask any poem to maintain an attitude long enough to be labelled. For all we can say about them, they yet remain chastely irreducible, as if they wanted nothing so much as to beggar commentary. But if we read them in bulk, we are left with the peculiar sensation we've been listening to a manic waif, someone for whom any audience becomes the most charitable therapy, for as soon as the poems stop talking, stop chatting, their speaker will fall dead. The chatter registers the *frisson*, the stimulation, but it also hints at the shiver of fear, the *gouffre*. Like all great improvisational artists, O'Hara thrives in the realm of nostalgia, a looking back that can never for a moment become true