

# The New Criterion

## Verse Chronicle

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### Stouthearted men

by [William Logan](#)

Reviews of Selected Poems, by George Oppen, edited by Robert Creeley; Walking to Martha's Vineyard, by Franz Wright; What Narcissism Means to Me, by Tony Hoagland; The Clerk's Tale, by Spencer Reece; Buffalo Yoga, by Charles Wright & Collected Poems, by Philip Larkin, edited by Anthony Thwaite.

George Oppen was one of the minor literary figures of the 1930s. [\[1\]](#) Friend of Pound, employer of Zukofsky, collaborator with Williams and Reznikoff, an animating spirit of the Objectivist movement, he was a young man with ideals and a little money, who with more money, or fewer ideals, might have become as useful as James Laughlin. In 1935, Oppen joined the Communist Party, while concealing his bourgeois past as a poet (this might have told him something about the party, if Stalin's purges did not). For the next twenty years or more, Oppen swore off poetry; when not training for party leadership, he organized the poor, fomented strikes, and protested against monopolies (though the aim of any union is to exploit a monopoly of labor). During World War II, he was wounded while serving in an anti-tank unit in Europe. After the war he built furniture, attended art school in Mexico on the GI Bill, and added to his swollen FBI file.

In the late Fifties, Oppen began writing again, in the starved, cruelly compressed style abandoned decades before. This resurrection of a poet so long out of touch, and even out of date, proved irresistible to young writers influenced by William Carlos Williams. The minor figure of the Thirties became a minor figure of the Sixties. Before the decade was over, he had won the Pulitzer Prize.

Oppen's spareness was like that of a Zen master with a migraine:

Never to forget her naked eyes

Beautiful and brave  
Her naked eyes

Turn inward

Feminine light

The unimagined  
Feminine light

Feminine ardor

Paring away his poems until they were nearly skeletons, he was often left with just a few ribs and

some knucklebones. His critics, who have frequently been his disciples, have made high claims for Oppen's minimalism, which he pursued more aggressively than Williams, though it could seem pinched and hectoring, a telegram from Moscow instructing you that everything you thought yesterday is wrong. In Pound or Williams, you see details refined until they glow with the special light of Imagism; but in Oppen you seem to get farther, down to the sludge at the bottom of the glass.

Oppen's poems are plain as a brown paper bag, slightly depressing, maudlin about people in a Thirties way (which was also a Sixties way), often tone-deaf to the virtues of language (that *is* his virtue, say his critics): "We want to say// 'Common sense'/ And cannot. We stand on// That denial/ Of death that paved the cities,/ Paved the cities// Generation/ For generation." The world of Oppen's poems has removed all that might qualify or enrich it, that might make it more various than some shopworn Platonic form. Michelangelo chiseled away the marble until he reached the figure—but what made him a genius was knowing when he *dreached* the figure. In other words, he knew when to stop.

Oppen's ambition often seems in excess of the words he left behind. At best his sketchy, expressionist method pays homage to the shudders and hesitations of thought; but this is fiendishly difficult to do well—otherwise H.D. and Edith Sitwell would be geniuses (the attempt to compare Oppen to Paul Celan is ludicrous). Oppen lived for pretentious observation and barnyard wisdom—"How much of the earth's/ Crust has lived/ The seed's violence!" His reviewers have used phrases like "stunning, elliptical," "the twentieth century's most dazzling maker of lines," "verse that sparkles like broken glass." Such opinions seem quaint as fossils.

Oppen offered an alternative to bland academic verse, as well as to the garrulous and self-absorbed Beats (the disorganized essay included here, the only one the poet ever wrote, comments drily on the difference); but his minimalism couldn't conceal how desolately inward his poetry became, like clippings from a freshman philosophy textbook or the empty thoughts of mannequins. You can't wholly dislike a poet whose main villains are Romans and shoppers; though, when a poet writing of poetry invokes Gethsemane, you wonder if his mind doesn't turn to betrayal a little too easily. How much more telling about the lives of the poor are the photographs of Helen Levitt or Walker Evans. You wonder what Oppen might have written instead about that anti-tank company.

This poet stopped writing for reasons as noble and laughable as Laura Riding's. Once a man has stopped, to show class solidarity or his despair at the tragedy that is the world, how does he start again without seeming a hypocrite? Yet Oppen ground on at his minor craft until the dry rot set in, a man at odds with his art, which ought to have benefited the art more than it did (art often thrives on contraries or arrested impulse). His poems wanted to be a poem, which wanted to be a line, which wanted to be a word, which at last wanted to be just a single letter, perhaps "I" or "O!"

Americans are suckers for self-pity—they order their mawkishness by the yard. We're still at heart a Puritan country; since we can't throw sinners in the stocks any more (unless it's done on prime time), we'll settle for the humiliating public apology followed by the spectacular relapse. Franz Wright's poems may be rancid and repetitive, but he's perfected a confessional tone angry and apologetic at once. *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, which recently won the Pulitzer Prize, is the latest installment of this fragile, self-obsessed author's stony path to grace.[\[2\]](#)

Most of Wright's poems are nasty, brutish, and short—it's an old joke, but Wright really *is* Hobbesian man, consoling himself with second-hand religious formulae and the salve of salvation:

Oh build a special city  
for everyone who wishes  
  
to die, where  
they might help one another out

and never feel ashamed  
maybe make a friend,  
etc.

*Maybe make a friend!* (This is how Mr. Rogers would talk, if he were an ex-junkie.) Yet for all the tabloid-style anguish, Wright's minimalism is deft and effective, with the emotional pressure of Louise Glück. These damaged and tormented poets (if they were to collaborate on *Passive-Aggression*, *Passive-Aggression for Dummies*, I'd hardly be surprised) have refined the poetic act to short prosaic sentences, brimful with resentment, seething with a rage for which words are inadequate. Behind every poem stands an entourage of nurses, shrinks, and self-help counselors.

Like few other poets in our pulse-taking age, Wright has solved the problem of how to reclaim the confessions of Lowell and Plath without falling victim to the *tableaux vivants* of a Sharon Olds (whose poems look, next to Wright's austerity, like the wildest *fin de siècle* dandyism). The pain is so raw, it's like watching documentary footage; but, if you make a competition of suffering by having nails driven through your wrists, one day someone will tear out his own tongue, pluck out his eyeballs, and call it art. Wright has a gift for sneered gratitude, for invoking God with the wheedling piety of a three-time loser before a parole board:

Thank You for letting me live for a little as one of the  
sane; thank You for letting me know what this is  
like. Thank You for letting me look at your frightening  
blue sky without fear, and your terrible world without  
terror, and your loveless psychotic and hopelessly  
lost  
with this love

Wright clings to his new-found religion the way men cling to the raft in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. He's so self-abasing, he reminds us that con artists are usually conning themselves along with everyone else. I see why some poets like his work—he's a sad-sack punk, a fifty-year-old who pisses and moans like a depressive teenager. Hell, you want to adopt him.

When Wright offers the crude, unprocessed sewage of suffering, it's nasty stuff. Yet this poet is surprisingly vague about the specifics of his torment (most of his poems are shouts and curses in the dark). He was cruelly affected by the divorce of his parents, though perhaps after forty years there should be a statute of limitations. His father was the poet James Wright, which seems to make the son twice damned—his poems whisper about an abandoned son of his own and hint repeatedly at attempted suicide. Just when I decide to dislike him for his truculent theatrics, his prima-donna moroseness (when have we had a poet more devoted to Our Lady of the Eternal Victim?), he'll write something so ruefully funny it's hard not to forgive him: "Now she is going to put on some/ nice cut-your-wrists music," or "What an evil potato goes through/ we can never know, but/ I'm beginning to resemble one." (And it's true—he *does* resemble one.) We need a modern Beddoes, and I wish Wright would apply for the job.

A few such lines are not enough, however, and soon he's back to the drudgery of self-loathing. Self-loathing is a meager thing for a poet to offer as his only medium, even if here and there he's able to turn his brutishness to account. "The Only Animal," the most accomplished poem in the book, collapses into the same kitschy sanctimoniousness that puts nodding Jesus dolls on car dashboards. Wright's religious angst, just the right stuff for our shallow, shopping-mall culture, makes his poems the Hallmark cards of the damned.

You meet a lot of Tony Hoagland's friends in Tony Hoagland's poems.<sup>[3]</sup> *What Narcissism Means to Me* names more names than you can shake a stick at—there's Alex and Greg and Boz and Rus, Susan and Margaret, Kath and Peter and Mary, Neal and Sylvia and Ann and Ethan, Carla and Jerry and Peter, and these just in the first half-dozen poems (it would be easier if they were all named George, like George Foreman's sons). Frank O'Hara used to give his friends walk-on roles, and many a young poet now stuffs his acknowledgments with what seems to be his entire address book. Hoagland's friends merely slouch around the house making smart remarks, which their Boswell dutifully records.

Alex said, *I wish they made a shooting gallery  
using people like that.*

Greg said, *That woman has a Ph.D. in Face.*  
Then we saw a preview for a movie

about a movie star who is having a movie made about her,  
and Boz said, *This country is getting stupider each year.*

Then Greg said that things were better in the sixties  
and Rus said that Harold Bloom said  
that Nietzsche said Nostalgia  
is the blank check issued to a weak mind,  
and Greg said ...

But enough! This is all very agreeable, as far as it goes, and makes the implicit criticism that Americans have become couch potatoes who get their Nietzsche second- or third-hand. Yet when poem succeeds poem of these nattering chums, you realize how little you care about them—if the poet stopped hanging out with them, he might have something more interesting to write about. They come and go with all the anonymity of Eliot's women talking of Michelangelo—except, four generations later, they're no longer talking of Michelangelo.

It's no secret that America is overrun with "RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes," that we have supersized our egos with our appetites—Hoagland isn't improving here on the wit and wisdom of Thorstein Veblen. What's peculiar is that the poet has chosen, not to analyze the condition, but to embody it; and his poems are full of droll banalities—they reduce everything to the lowest common denominator and smirk about it. If Dante's *Inferno* were populated by Hoagland's buddies, they'd look around and not be able to think of a single complaint.

O'Hara wrote his I-do-this, I-do-that poems half a century ago. These days they seem, most of them, awfully trivial; but Hoagland aspires to go him one better, or worse. The poems here are cozy but forgettable, no harder to swallow than a dose of aspirin. If Hoagland ever feels any unease—and he does, sometimes, for a minute or two—it's best to assuage it with a wisecrack and drift back to that waking dream we call television (he spends a lot of time watching television and wants the privilege of whining about it).

How did I come to believe in a government called Tony Hoagland?  
with an economy based on flattery and self-protection?  
and a sewage system of selective forgetting?  
and an extensive history of broken promises?

What did I get in exchange for my little bargain? What did I lose?  
Where are my natural resources, my principal imports,  
and why is my landscape so full of stony ridges and granite outcroppings?

These lines are deceptively good-natured, and they're as deep as he gets. There's nothing terrible about such poetry—Hoagland has a ready-to-wear style, the kind you can throw into the washer when it's dirty and take out half an hour later, wrinkle free. Such a style can take on any subject, yet never put two words together in a meaningful way. If he can reduce the awful heritage of slavery to a TV tennis match, world peace should be a snap.

Perhaps it's enough to write such mild, self-conscious, smugly unambitious poems. Hoagland's subject is the late, declining American empire; and he intends to watch the fires from the comfort of his sofa. You don't ever get the feeling he reads, or is affected by anything he can't shut off with a remote control—he's made so uncomfortable by AIDS he calls it "one of those diseases known by its initials." Despite the chattering presence of myriads of Hoagland's friends, I've rarely read a book that seemed lonelier. Even Narcissus wasn't that lonely—he had himself for company.

*The Clerk's Tale* was written by the assistant manager of a Brooks Brothers store in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, a world as distant from poetry as Wallace Stevens's office in the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. [4] How unlikely (and unlike anyone else's), however, Stevens' poems were. Spencer Reece's confident, stagy, slightly occluded first book proves that poetry not written by academics can be just as academic as any assistant professor's.

It cheered me up to think the title poem might have a little Chaucer in it, but "The Clerk's Tale" is rather the *cri de coeur* of a man who works in a clothing shop, a man perhaps a little like the author. Though verging on self-pity, it portrays the lives endured blankly on the other side of the counter, reminding us how much the customer must mask out just to buy a shirt. (That, indeed, was the whole point of keeping servants faceless presences—when you start to sympathize with them, someone somewhere starts sewing mob caps.)

Reece's mature if slightly overheated voice shows how much can be gained by waiting a few years to publish a first book. He's in his early forties, about the age when Frost and Stevens published theirs. I'm not drawn to all parts of Reece's talent—he has a taste for short declarative sentences, sometimes half a dozen in a row, that sound like tabloid reportage. Elsewhere the touches of artistry, and even aestheticism, offer transcendence on the cheap:

when the maple sweats and saps at the corners of his mouth  
and when the oak shakes his leaves like a thousand horseshoes  
is the time my heart bangs with barn-joy and I breathe in the subtle  
approbation of death coming as I recognize the Byzantine look  
of the trees emptying themselves of themselves.

*Barn-joy*, eh? The poet's exuberance seems heartfelt but somewhat demented, and he can't help himself from busting out into lines like "encircled by a halo of rocks, trees, crops, rivers, clouds—/ by every blessed thing conspiring together to save my life" or "I've been waiting for the tulip bulbs, those necessary ambulances,/ to come and sound the emergencies of the world. Nothing so far." There's only so much a reader can take before wanting to crawl under a blanket to shut out the neon signs.

Reece includes two sequences of ghazals that aren't ghazals at all (they're scraps from John Ashbery's wastebasket: "Tra la la la. Lovers fling their arms open like medicine cabinets,/ offering their baptized scalps to fun new people like thesauruses"). Some young poets can make new selves from their influences, but Reece gets into his influences' skin the way he might throw on a

Halloween costume. The book ends with an overlong sequence of unpunctuated poems that sound more like late Merwin than Merwin.

It's easy to catalogue the problems in these poems—their preciousness and exaggeration of feeling; their news-at-eleven opportunism; their taste for freakish similes, as if W. H. Auden's executors were having a fire sale (a severed tongue "in her hand like a ticket," "fish disappear like keys," "hydrangeas shift in their pitcher like wigs"). Indeed, though a few poems possess a beautiful modesty, many are afflicted with a boorish loudness, as if they had caught Dylan Thomas disease—Reece's *diminuendi* might be other poets *crescendi*.

Yet if Reece makes some mistakes young poets make, and some winningly his own, there are enough moments of raw talent and character to make those promises young poets are known for.

There was a yacht club meeting every summer  
with a cannon that went off—*baboom!*  
Women arrived in their thin Talbots belts,  
carrying wicker purses shaped like paint cans  
with whalebone carvings fastened on top,  
resembling the hardened excrement seagulls drop.  
Occasionally the purses would open,  
albeit reluctantly, like safe-deposit boxes.  
Men wore cranberry trousers and Brooks Brothers blue blazers.

There's product placement for you! Many of the descriptions are rendered with similar lightness, only occasionally coming too close to the tears the poet always seems on the verge of weeping. In his best poems his modesty becomes suffering and his discontinuity, rage. His portraits are reminiscent of those by the elderly Rembrandt, pushing paint this way and that, almost from pure joy, until the painting has been thumbed into life.

*Buffalo Yoga* is the silliest title in a body of work that gives it close competition in *Zone Journals* and *A Short History of the Shadow*.<sup>[5]</sup> Charles Wright, who turns seventy next year, has for a long while been among our best poets. My complaint has been that lately he hasn't written any *poems*, just bundles of lines, loose as kindling, offered to the reader with a crooked country grin, as if to say, "Why, you can't hardly find so nice a bunch of kindling in fifty mile." And you couldn't, if what you were after was kindling.

Wright is a master of the natural image—he exemplifies what Pound wanted when he said the "natural object is always the *adequate* symbol."

The sun has set behind the Blue Ridge,  
And evening with its blotting paper lifts off the light.

Indeed, if they didn't sometimes have the air of a later day, Wright's images would seem pilfered from Pound's notebooks. The problem in Wright's work has been that he gets beyond such gorgeous images only to indulge in garden metaphysics. Wright has read the Chinese poets Pound was so influenced by—the new poems often resemble ancient Chinese scrolls, otherworldly but static. At times he's like some bearded sage crossed with Mammy Yokum, puffing on a corncob pipe:

God's ghost taps once on the world's window,  
then taps again

And drags his chains through the evergreens.  
Weather is where he came from, and to weather returns,  
His backside black on the southern sky,  
Mumbling and muttering, distance like doomsday loose in his hands.

The silliness here doesn't quite outweigh the pleasure, the calculation and risk; when Wright pulls off such pretentious humbuggery, you're glad he took his chances. Yet the poems are too often saddled with maundering esoterics, Sunday school phrases like the "stained glare of angel wings," and moments when the poet waxes philosophic about his work, having perhaps read more of late, apologetic Pound than is good for a man: "I tried to give form to the formless,/ and speech to the unspeakable./ To the light that shines without shadow, I gave myself." Pound earned the right to say similar things at the end of his life; here there's just the sound of a man patting his own back.

Wright has been writing fragments for too long; the new poems that make the most impression hold their form in narrative or reminiscence, haunted by memory, by old dreams and desires. The poems are haggard and loose-hipped, sometimes winning in their refusal to force a story into shape, yet often collapsing into a banal gloss on memory and narrative—they're so affectless and cool, it's hard not to grow irritated when they pass off as profound the most appalling cornbread platitudes: "Imagination is merely the door./ All we can do is knock hard/ And hope that something will open it." The poet's lyric fragments are merely an admission that telling a tale is beyond him.

By his fifties or sixties a poet has taken out a certain number of patents (perhaps all he is likely to); and these he defends to the death, whether or not they're worth it. The best poets may take out hundreds, scattering them across the public domain, secure that no one will be able to use them quite as well. Like most older poets, Wright has sunk into a mire of self-imitation, and sometimes self-flattery. Yet here and there, broadcast through this self-indulgent book, are stanzas of astonishing freshness and needle-eyed vision:

Shadows are clumsy and crude, their eggs few,  
And dragonflies, like lumescnt [*sic*] Ohio Blue Tip matchsticks,  
Puzzle the part-opened iris stalks,  
    hovering and stiff.  
New flies frenetic against the glass,  
Woodpeckers at their clocks, the horses ablaze in the grained light.

You'd have to go a long way to find a poet who does these things so well (though where was the copy editor when Wright tried to strike the match of *lumescnt*?). It's like finding a man who makes brilliant origami out of *Playboy* centerfolds—you love them, but you wonder if it's an art worth pursuing.

When Philip Larkin died in 1985, he was the most beloved poet in Britain; only the year before, he had turned down the chance to become poet laureate. Anthony Thwaite, his old friend, edited the *Collected Poems* (1988; U.S., 1989) by placing Larkin's poems in chronological order and infiltrating scores of uncollected poems among the published verse. This might have been a sensible procedure for another poet; but the earlier volume, which this edition replaces [6] concealed the strengths and diluted the intensity of the most important British poet between Auden and Geoffrey Hill.

Larkin's reputation has been in free fall since the publication of Thwaite's *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (1992) and Andrew Motion's literary biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), which revealed that behind the poems' miserable loner lay a real loner, one nasty and misogynist and racist to boot. Why were people surprised? Yet they *were* surprised. Many readers apparently thought that Larkin's morose self-hatred concealed something lovable, that a man so wise about inadequacy and

foible must have been exaggerating the ugly part of his personality. Few thought he might have toned down his opinions out of embarrassment or shame, that instead of a shy librarian he might be an alcoholic who kept porn magazines in his office closet.

Larkin was “one of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys.” The world had changed around him, and what he disliked was that it had changed. The repulsive opinions appear in his letters, not the poems; but there are worse things than concealing private intolerance behind public respectability (think how despicable the reverse is). Whether he’s referring to Morocco as “coonland,” or calling the government “decimal-loving, nigger-mad, army-cutting,” or saying, “The Slade is a cunt place, full of 17-year-old cunts,” we have no idea what Larkin felt when he wrote such things. He may have been indulging in matey blokishness (the remarks are made mostly to old schoolmates), proving himself immune to new public manners, or merely revealing the lethal prejudices he’d learned to keep private. It might have been a mixture of these things; but it is crude to assume he was moved only by hatred, just as it would be exculpatory to believe his impulses were without trace of hatred.

In a tell-all age all must be told, but it’s crucial to remember how recently such language was common. If we’re going to call Eliot an anti-Semite and Larkin a racist, we ought to start drawing up an indictment of Sylvia Plath, who noted in her journals a girl’s “long Jewy nose”; or Marianne Moore, who mentioned in a letter that a “coon took me up in the elevator”; or William Carlos Williams, whose letters are peppered with references to wops, niggers, and Jews. Until very recently such remarks were so prevalent in Britain and America, we do ourselves no credit by turning into scapegoats the writers who merely succumbed to the bigotry of the age.

We are no better if we condemn such opinions without seeing where Larkin rose above them, sometimes merely by exposing the insecurity and self-loathing at their heart. His poems may be the record of how a man converts his basest feelings to something more humane; and we read him, not because he is less base, but because the flaws reveal his pathos. In all their quiet generousities, their humility despite themselves, the poems make clear they were not simply a way of concealing his prejudices for the public taste.

Indeed, why should we assume that letters are any more trustworthy than poems? If I lie about myself in my poems, trying to appear wiser or more charitable, in my letters I may make myself seem dumber and more intolerant. People who don’t want to be known in public don’t necessarily drop their trousers in private. The current taste for *meae culpae* is no more laudable than the self-criticism communist governments used to demand of prisoners, before standing them against a wall. Will later generations value so highly the poets who quoted only the approved opinions of our day, or preached only the pieties the age demanded?

Anthony Thwaite, no doubt stung by the protests raised by critics, has now done more or less what he ought to have done originally, arranged the poems in the order Larkin wished (few poets constructed their books as carefully), with appendices to collect the strays. The new introduction is, alas, defensive and unapologetic. Having omitted any poem the poet failed to publish, Thwaite has thrown some of the babies out with the bath water. Almost a hundred minor poems no longer appear here—though few will be missed, two or three (including “An April Sunday . . .,” “The Dance,” and “Love Again,” all of which Thwaite laments not including) deserve a place in Larkin’s collected works.

Larkin ought to be considered (though the idea would have given him the heebie-jeebies) a confessional poet *avant la lettre*, revealing himself as brutally in his way as Lowell and Plath in theirs. He’s our great poet of mixed feelings, of disappointment and self-doubt (and as good as Frost—who was also something of a monster in private—on the complexities of human nature). Larkin’s poems catch the tension between impulse and reserve (reserve always winning out), and proclaim, not in the least ironically, the virtues of ordinariness—“May you be ordinary,” he wrote to

a new baby.

Though his early poems were influenced by Yeats and Auden, the model for Larkin must be Housman. They share the same taste for moral observation, the wry and somewhat sour demeanor, the preference for the memorable phrase over the clever one, though in other ways they could not be more different—Housman looked for classical virtue and often gave way to sentiment, while Larkin pursued only his own unsentimental muddles amid the bric-à-brac of English life. His most heartbreaking poems fear that life is going on somewhere else—he is a wonderful poet of nothings (“Nothing,” as he said, “like something, happens anywhere”).

The list of Larkin’s best poems must include “I Remember, I Remember,” “Mr Bleaney,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” “MCMXIV,” “Talking in Bed” (has there ever been a better poem about the bedroom?), “Dockery and Son,” “An Arundel Tomb,” “The Trees,” “Going, Going,” “Homage to a Government,” “This Be the Verse,” “Sad Steps,” the great swansong “Aubade,” and dozens scarcely less fine. In the past century, no British poet except Housman and Auden has written verse as memorable, or better suited to public memory. The virtues of Larkin’s ordinariness have never been more necessary.

**William Logan** will have a volume of early selected poems out in the spring.

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