

Olson as oracle: 'Projective Verse' thirty years on

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It was quite a surprise to me, not very long ago, to find a few of my recent poems featured in a rather special anthology called *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*. I should explain that the surprise wasn't that the poems were included—I had been asked for them, everything had been done properly—it was to discover that this anthology, with its preface, was designed as a kind of manifesto for a poetic theory called 'open form poetry'. I might have been prepared for it, perhaps, by C. K. Stead's illuminating discussion of the whole subject in his lecture to the 1979 literary conference in Wellington.¹ But surprised I was; a bit like the surprise of Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme on discovering that he had been talking prose all his life.

Of course one doesn't dispute the existence of a widespread and highly fashionable movement in poetry; there's an immense quantity of spirited new writing which, if it isn't all directly derived from 'open form' theory, may be supposed to be a product of the same influences. It's a movement (perhaps a piece of literary history in the making), one more movement—it has its name, 'open form', the way past movements have had their names: Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite, Symbolist, Imagist, Surrealist, and so on. The best of the poetry lives after them; the theories, the manifestoes survive as intellectual or academic fossils—don't misunderstand me, I don't mean the study of fossils isn't important, simply that it hasn't much to do with the enjoyment of a living art. The difference with 'open form' is that it's not yet fossilised. The theory of it may be closer to that condition than some of its exponents realise. But it is new enough, *present* enough, to be a matter of lively interest to some of the poets and their readers too. Which means that it is also debatable.

Let's be clear about this. A literary movement, of itself, achieves nothing; and it carries the good and the bad along with it, quite indifferently. A major movement changes a great many things, but never so many, or so completely, as its leaders and its followers think it does. And the relation between the theory (I mean the theory of poetry in particular) and the new poems that actually get written can be a lot more complex and obscure than it looks at first