

Chester Johnson at The Culture Center, New York, Nov. 28, 2017

On Tuesday, November 28, 2017, J. Chester Johnson spoke to a regional meeting of the ALSCW. This meeting was convened in the perpetually agreeable Culture Center at 410 Columbus Avenue, New York, NY, two blocks east of Zabar's. The space was cheerily packed with celebrants, 35 in attendance on a pleasantly chilly November evening in New York.

Prior to the talk, Chester and his wife Freda indulged the many looking for an ear, an embrace or an inscription. Slowly the guests continued to file in, fill glasses, eat foods served on mercifully long toothpicks. Chester continued to greet, talking with the new arrivals and inscribing more of his work. An observer got the overwhelming sense that Chester is a man of not only great learning and output, but also of incredible generosity, a resource that was in high demand this night as guests gleefully crowded the table on which his books lay (*Auden, the Psalms, and Me* and *Now And Then: Selected Longer Poems*).

OPENING REMARKS

The evening was hosted and Chester introduced to the waiting crowd by poet Phillis Levin. Professor Levin informed the audience that they were in for something of a “hybrid event”—part poetry reading, part talk—an evening which would speak to Chester's talents as a writer, critic, and activist.

Professor Levin offered an ecumenical welcome to a swelling and diverse crowd of eager faces. Hers was a welcome to all—all interested in conversation—from any walk of life that would like to be part of the conversation: a fitting overture to this eclectic gathering of scholars, writers, and friends. She noted that while she had brought her copy Auden, she was not going to quote from it.

A warm and full-hearted thanks was paid to Chester, Professor Levin noting that his presence meant so much. She observed that it was Chester's “life's work as an author and person in the world in terms of civic responsibility” that was cause for celebration and befitting an event organized by the ALSCW. Concluding succinctly: “So fitting that you are here.”

THE TALK

When we turn to the psalter, we do so because it is a part of our current service. But it remains a part of our worship because of the transportive power of the psalms. Because they make us feel a bit less lonesome, they make the abstract more specific.

Chester, speaking on the psalms, noted this very power—that psalms (though most certainly from another time) speak to our time. They speak to both “our individual and collective suffering, the need to praise, the healing power of praise.”

Our moment is one in which the verities may at times seem distant, almost relative. But by connecting our spirit, both individual and collective, back to the headwater of our humanness we may redeem ourselves as well as our fellow man. This is why we go back to the psalms. It was, per Chester's observation, Psalm 13 (“How long”) that informed the modern civil rights movement.

And he would know. Both as a deft poet and committed heart and hand for the civil rights struggle, Chester's life has been one of liturgy—one of public service—one of common prayer. *The New York Times* got it right when covering Chester and Freda working in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Chester observed the “Eucharist as a mode of reconciling.” So is the sort of



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service practiced by Freda and Chester.

Chester surmised that the audience came out for the Auden, though if you asked, I think most would have said they came out for Chester.

He took some time to read a few of his own poems, selections from *Now and Then*. For those looking forward to Chester's autobiography, the closest you will ever get is the poems.

Speaking to Auden's own sense of these things, Chester seemed to agree that the poet should never feel the need to write an autobiography. That's what the poems are for. However, the collection *Now and Then* is a bit more personal still. If we want to know Chester's life—his life with Freda, his life of activism and poetic output, his deep Southern roots and the need for reconciliation which touches us all—we can turn to these poems.

Chester began by reading poems from the section “Mediations on Civil

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Rights Activists” giving due to Ida B. Wells-Barnett, lending his “persona voice” to her. And here and now—at the height of the civil rights movement and in this room on the Upper West Side, the psalms remain central to experience and expression. Reading this poem, Chester acknowledged the influence of Psalm 13 in here—the need to write the “we are what we have to see”.

This moral obligation to witness which drives much of Chester’s work can also be located in Auden’s own work, as seen in “The Refugee Blues” which speaks to the antisemitic violence and destruction of the Holocaust and resultant refugee crisis:

Dreamed I saw a building with a
thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a
thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my
dear, not one of them was ours.
Stood on a great plain in the
falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched
to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my
dear, looking for you and me.

Both poets, Auden and Chester Johnson challenge us, focalizing through the victimized, extending the public and political role of the poet writing in his day and writing to the eternal struggle of man.

Selections from “The Mixer” a poem of homecoming and “January 12th, 1967” a more perhaps imaginative undertaking which combines fiction and a touch of experience, Chester noted “the god of art is no match for the god of survival”.

Chester generously continued, reading from “Pater, Magnificus: Story of Pug”, a poem about the death of a father: a loss suffered before Chester’s second birthday. The reading captivated the room, speaking to a deep and shared desire to know and to recon-

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cile: “I’ll never find him really, of course, but that’s hardly the point—at least now, I can compare notes with him and know Pug is trying to give me a straight answer.”

CLOSING

Chester concluded by giving the people what they may want. (Though hearing him read from “Martin” that night is what I remember best, being dosed against fear, inculcated with bravery and hope for these in a time which can feel hateful, cynical and divisive.) He spoke about his relationship with Auden and his experience taking over the role as the poet on the drafting committee for the retranslation of the Psalms from the poet. He spoke about the “immense struggle to reconcile time, eternity, and the word”. Chester replaced Auden in 1971 when Auden left the committee. The two communicated via letters and Chester served as poet till the psalter retranslation was published in 1979, included in the revised Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.

Chester furnished the audience with stories of Auden’s obsession with the revision to the prayer book and frustrations therein (“We should have done the opposite of the Catholics and

returned to the Latin.”), the generally agreed upon problems endemic to the Coverdale psalms (per CS Lewis: “A sound modern scholar has more Hebrew in his little finger than Coverdale had in his whole body.”), and the importance of “a sense of the ceremonial in language and life.” As such, his poetic undertaking retranslating the psalms is stoved in love and in a sensitivity to the sounds of the Book of Common Prayer.

Perhaps most tellingly (or most helpfully, or most memorably) was Chester’s revelation of a line of Auden’s in his final letter to Chester. Auden ends his letter: “Lastly I don’t believe there is such an animal as 20th century man.” Chester initially thought it was a throwaway line, but his views have changed since. Now he sees it as a cogent summery of Auden’s views on a critical issue. Namely that “all things share a commonality.” We are all linked, the unborn, the living, the dead, us and Coverdale, all of us across time.

We need the idiom and we need the tradition. We need the opportunity to lament, to praise, to sing, because we have the need as great as ever to reconcile and hold each other in communion. An ancient need that found expression on a pleasantly chilly November night in New York.

—Noah Jampol



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Noah Simon Jampol earned his PhD in English Language and Literature at the Catholic University of America in May 2017, having defended his project: “Science Fiction as Ethical Response to the Holocaust: Philip Roth and Jewish American Fiction”. His work has been presented widely and has appeared in journals such as *Robert Penn Warren Studies*, *The Shawangunk Review*, *Cognition and Developmental Psychology*. He is currently a Lecturer in English at The City University of New York, Bronx Community College and lives in New York.