

Olson Now: Wales Black Mountain Conference

*dedicated to Ralph Maud (1928-2014) Welshman, Canadian &
dedicated Olsonian — a most pleasant trinity.*

*Paradise is a person. Come into this world.
The soul is a beautiful Angel.
And the thought of its thought is the rage
of Ocean : apophainesthai.
Charles Olson*

1. Olson Then: A Necessary Clearing

A succinct summing up of Charles Olson's place in poetry was given on the back cover of Ralph Maud's corrective biography entitled *Charles Olson at the Harbor*. After suggesting that Olson was "without question the most influential of the 'New American Poets' published by Grove Press in the mid-twentieth century," the blurb states:

Synthesizing the experimental avant-garde of the Black Mountain School with the uncompromising existentialism of the Beat Generation; the new structuralism of the San Francisco Renaissance; and heralding the postmodern deconstructionism of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets; his spirit, mind and intellect are ubiquitous in late twentieth-century poetry.

This is, to my mind, an essentially correct statement, even if some of my L-poetry friends may disagree, although as Ammiel Alcalay has put it: “While I’ve been aware of various points of friction between some of those who have come to be classified as 'language poets' and aspects of Olson’s poetics, a lot of that history has become submerged in further false debates. Such false debates come at the cost of deeper exploration, refinement of positions, and possibilities for re-imagining and re-defining. Such structures mirror the constraints and privatizing forces within official political, academic, and media frameworks.”

While it is not possible here to go into great detail about the poetry wars of the end of the last century, it is however necessary to briefly sum up why in the 80s & 90s, Olson & his poetics got to a great extent written out, silenced from the most visible, public discourse on poetry. On one side this is due to the meteoric rise of the AWP, the Associated Writing Programs, an org that oversaw & still oversees much of the thinking of the hundreds, if not thousands of creative writing programs that came into existence during those decades. 99% of these are based on a tradition of the lyric poem as self-expression, or more accurately, of ego, using either limp free-verse or old fixed forms, and profoundly anti-intellectual stances. Thinking was left to the well-controlled, -patrolled & -fenced English &/or philosophy departments, with the creative writing playpen centered on “feeling,” “gut-experience,” etc. The universities loved it, because 1) these creative writing departments were cash-

cows as the US universities became more & more refashioned along the model of capitalist corporations where the bottom-line was the dollar & certainly not knowledge; secondly the U's loved them because they were not contentious politically but solidly navel-gazing & only interested in spawning imitations of themselves without challenging any of the ideological basis of this reconfigured educational system. Olson would have turned over in his grave — remember: he was not only a poet & thinker, but he had also been the rector of one of the great experimental educational adventures in the US, Black Mountain College. Even his function as a teacher has been criticized, or rather besmirched, & he is then called “a bully” —especially in relation to women students— though these allegations & others in relation to contemporary identity politics, have been just that, allegations. His teaching was unorthodox indeed, but its aim was well defined by Robert Duncan who witnessed Olson at Black Mountain, and interviewed by Ann Charters, says this, at the end of a discussion of Olson's interests in alchemy & magic in poetry, linking the practice of poetry to the practice of teaching:

...This is an essentially magic view of the poem. Not magic in the sense of doing something that you mean to do in the end, but in the sense of causing things to happen... A great deal of the force of Charles and his use of the school was — he saw education as spiritual attack. On the first level we can take it as to attack a subject. There also was a kind of spiritual attack, it seems to me on students frequently. He wanted things to happen in them. I don't mean he wanted things to

happen in his classes. He wanted things to happen in them spiritually. There is a very important difference between me and Charles. Ginsberg shares it. Charles wanted to produce a new and redeemed man. This actually is Charles' alchemy.

At another level, the big O's quasi-disappearance from the public view is also connected with events at the one public place — the State University at Buffalo — he was closely associated with after Black Mountain. There, after Olson's departure in 1965 & his death in 1970, some of his old students & fellow faculty members continued to work on publishing and thinking through the Olsonian oeuvre; for example the work done by The Institute of Further Studies which published *Pleistocene Man* (1968) and the "Curriculum for the Study of the Soul" materials for necessary investigation based on a plan Olson had sketched out on 2 pages, overseen & edited by John Clarke & Albert Glover, & which came to 28 chapbooks by 28 poets encompassing 3 generations written & published between 1972 & 2002. The collection of these materials has now been republished in a (2016) 2-volume set from Spuyten Duyvil in NY.

In 1995, in volume 2 of my & Jerome Rothenberg's *Poems for the Millennium* anthology, Olson's original proposal is reprinted. In 2010 — the Olson centenary year — I proposed that it may be time for a version of this Curriculum to be undertaken by younger poets, something that hasn't happened yet, but that I don't despair to see actualized eventually. Maybe this conference & the present availability of the initial

set will help bring Olson studies back to the fore. But let me get back to the moments of the dimming down of Olson's work as this is necessary groundwork — to pun on Duncan — to envisage an upswing of Olson today.

No time to deal with the U of Buffalo Olson wars in detail. If interested, check out the various pieces by the excellent Michael Boughn & the sadly departed Benjamin Hollander on the *Dispatches* website. Clearly the worst that happened to Olson as far as I am concerned, is the 1991 so-called “biography” of Olson by Tom Clark, *The Allegory of a Poets Life*. Championed by two close Olson friends & collaborators, Robert Creeley and Edward Dorn, who both had some careerist skin in the game for their own alpha-male self-aggrandizement via the demotion and belittling of Olson, the book (to quote Boughn) is the inaccurate portrait

of a narcissistic, bullying drunk [that] perfectly fleshed out the image of Olson as a patriarchal, sexist monster and became fodder for reviewers who used it to dismiss Olson's work as a fraud. The book caused an explosion of argument and counter-argument over its value with Creeley leading the defense and Ralph Maud, a somewhat obsessive Olson scholar (but what scholar[s] isn't a little obsessive?) minutely detailing every error in the book which Clark ignored.

For this occasion I have reread Maud's book, *Charles Olson at the Harbor*, & it is indeed a point by point rebuttal of Clark's book which is shown up as the blatant fraud it is.

Two more rebuttals / correctives are needed — first that of a suggested lingering classically male macho stance, and again let me cite Ammiel Alcalay who has written well about this issue:

If one, for instance, seriously considers Muriel Rukeyser's description of 'the fear of poetry,' pointed out at the height of the Cold War, and then sees Olson's move into poetry (as a physically large and potentially politically powerful man, also at the height of the Cold War), as clear defiance of ruling concepts of masculinity, what the women writers [below] have to say about Olson opening things up takes on an entirely different meaning. Moreover, a narrow liberal feminist critique too often ignores class issues and obfuscates the character of Olson's influence. For example, how his own working-class background allied him to working-class students like Dorn, Rumaker, and Wieners, the latter two in particular later becoming active in the gay liberation movement.

Let me cite 2 poets. First, Kathleen Frazer:

It was Olson's declared move away from the narcissistically probing, psychological defining of self—so seductively explored by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell in the early and mid-1960s... —that provided a major alternative ethic of writing for women poets. While seriously committed to gender consciousness, a number of us carried an increasing skepticism towards any fixed rhetoric of the poem, implied or intoned. We resisted the prescription of authorship as an exclusively unitary proposition—the essential "I" positioned as central to the depiction of reflectivity....As antidote to a mainstream poetics that enthusiastically embraced those first dramatic "confessional" poems.

Essential here the quote from Olson in “PROJECTIVE VERSE” where he had already proposed: “The getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature.” Frazer again:

The excitement and insistence of Olson’s spatial, historical, and ethical margins, while clearly speaking from male imperatives, nevertheless helped to stake out an area whose initial usefulness to the poem began to be inventively explored by American women—in some cases drastically reconceived, beginning with work in the 1960s and 1970s by such poets as Barbara Guest, Susan Howe, and Hannah Weiner and continuing forward to very recent poetry by women just beginning to publish.

And here is Anne Waldman:

I date my confirmation of a life in poetry to the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965 and the point where Charles Olson says: “No, I wanna talk, I mean, you want to listen to a poet? You know, a poet, when he’s alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems is the same thing....” But that oral moment in Berkeley where Olson played the fool, the anti-hero poet at his shamanic worst, or most vulnerable on some level—that presence was like a strange attractor as I, as a young person, witnessed it. And the event still ripples in my poetic consciousness.

I would further suggest that Olson's thinking & cultural critique actually leads us right back to the very beginnings of the mindset and ensuing ideologies that opened the long reign of phallocracy — and points to the way out.

2) Olson Now

Let's look at some of the ways Olson is of use today: & as I just mentioned history, let me propose that a rereading of *The Special View of History* would yield much use today. A perfect summing up was done by Olson himself in the following poem from *Maximus IV, V, VI*:

A Later Note on Letter # 15

In English the poetics became meubles – furniture –
thereafter (after 1630)

& Descartes was the value

until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
by getting the universe in (as against man alone

& that concept of history (not Herodotus's,
which was a verb, to find out for yourself:

'istorin, which makes any one's acts a finding out for him or her
self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere

at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides, or
the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot

– live television or what – is a lie

as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being
self-action with Whitehead's important corollary: that no event

is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal
event

The poetics of such a situation
are yet to be found out

& that's still our job!

Asked during Olson's centennial — already 8 years ago! — when or why I would read Olson, I responded:

Where(ever) I turn in need of a different clarity.

Or when returning to his work for re-confirming a hunch, usually that Olson had thought or started to think through some specific problem way back — & that his thought was/is still *of essential use*: for example what he said re **proprioception**, or in the same booklet, the pages called GRAMMAR — a “book” (& there for me specifically the question of MIDDLE VOICE... the number of such fertile nodes is endless.

Here, a few recent encounters/sightings /concerns, very lively for me right now:

1. When in the mid-nineties Jerome Rothenberg & I worked on the second volume of *Poems for the Millennium*, the volume that would bring us up to the end of the 20th, and would try to lean in on the next, this, our, century, what poem seemed to us to be able to do the job, to work as an intro to the most powerful of mid-century horrors — the section is called *In the Dark* — and simultaneously point toward a method of going beyond, of finding a way to be useful now, today? Charles Olson's *La Préface* came to stand at the beginning of that book, just before Celan's *Todesfuge*.

That was a collage with or of history, & the thinking behind it went as follows: in the middle of the twentieth century, a sudden, convulsive and lethal spasm we

know as World War II completed a slower socio-political, economic and cultural continental drift that wrestled center-place and -weight away from Europe and handed it to North America — where Olson, born in 1910, i.e. a decade before Paul Celan, wrote a poem around May 1946 called “La Préface.” Olson saw the year of that poem’s composition not only as the end of a 5-year war or of a 12-year regime, but rather as the end of a first human age, a *yuga* that stretched from Pleistocene man to the concentration camps. He had seen the drawings of the scratchings and graffiti made by the inmates of Buchenwald and brought back by the Italian-American artist Corrado Cagli, who as a GI had been among the first to enter Buchenwald. The birth and ascent of the human imagination as we witness it in prehistoric art had now come to this:

“Buchenwald new Altamira cave / With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.”

Olson cites one of those inscriptions, — “My name is NO RACE” — in what one has to read both as a bitter allusion to the race the camp was built to extinguish, to turn into a no race, i.e. the Jews, and in a wider sense, the human race which in those actions had negated its own definition as a race, better a species of creature above or beyond the animal level by showing the absolute inhumanity it was capable of.

But by making the claim for a past human age, now closed, Olson also and simultaneously made the claim for a new age, to begin after Buchenwald. In the final lines : “Blake Underground // The babe / the Howling Babe” we can read the figure of the human after the paradisiacal passage through innocence and after the infernal passage through experience – history & politics, here – coming into the possibility of an “ordered innocence” as Blake put it. Olson certainly is inviting the reader — of necessity a survivor of the first yuga — to move out of the hellish circle of history, i.e. out of Europe and into an new, more open possibility: “Put war away with time, come into space.”

“We are born” writes Olson, “not of the buried but of these unburied dead” – an eerie echo of Celan’s “Death Fugue” where the “we” of the survivors “scoop[s] out a grave in the sky where it’s roomy to lie.” All poetry, after that date & into our own present & the future beyond, will have to be, at some level or other, *a poetry of witnessing*. But it cannot stop there if it wants to be of essential use, as both Olson and Celan insist, it cannot simply bear witness to the past, it has at the same time to be resolutely turned to the future, i.e. it has to be open & imaginatively engaged in the construction of a new world. It is that forward looking, that vertical stance that I also hear in Celan’s question: “Who witnesses for the witness?” And yet there is something that links these continents, these poets, these poetics — a something that has to do with a stance, a way of being, a verticality. On 6 April 1970 — 2 weeks before he

killed himself — Paul Celan wrote in a letter to Ilana Shmueli: “When I read my poems, they grant me, momentarily, the possibility to exist, to stand.” That stance, that verticality, was essential for the tall American Olson, so important yet so slippery for the small European — who let go, went with the horizontal flux of the water. Olson & Celan — those 2 core figures of my own poetic universe — died both suddenly, unexpectedly, in the first months of 1970, leaving us to finish the century & imagine the next one, as we are trying to do here right now.

2. — This first human-**yuga** calculation also brings to mind Olson’s other overview of history, i.e. how things went wrong from circa 450 BC to early 20C period, with Socrates/Plato skewing our thinking until modern Heisenbergian physics (& Whitehead’s philosophy of process) allowed us to righten the ship. These formulations early on propose a thinking about what is now fashionably called the **anthropocene**.

Deepening it today — especially once exposed the lethal bullshit of academic conservative “End of History” theories that became fashionable after 1989 & which are of course only a tiredness, an exhaustion & a spite. Nor, if we think through & take a guide-line from Olson, the archaeologist of morning, is there need for all that Hegelianism, that, left & right, has messed with the best from, say, France pre-1950 (Kojève & how Kojève's philosophy of history gets picked up in Chicago as a

profound reactionary reading by such as Leo Strauss) and the US (& world) post-1950s, the absolutes, idealistic or realistic, marxist or capitalist.

3. Olson's writing in the *Maximus* & in the essays is also, before the time, very conscious of the **ecological crisis** & the need to address it in this new *yuga*. I'm with Benjamin Hollander when he points out

the history of a worker/community poetics and politics in Olson's writings, in his letters to the poet and union organizer Vincent Ferrini and as reflected in Ferrini's magazine, *Four Winds*, as well as in his community activism (e.g. his campaigns to save the wetlands) and correspondence with *The Gloucester Times* ... the letters are an attempt to call the people's attention to a number of pressing issues, from the city's seeming amnesia regarding her greatest painter, Fitz Hugh Lane ... to the consequences of the razing of precious buildings, by urban renewal, or what Olson referred to as 'renewing without reviewing.'

4. **The Nomadic.** — One of the ways in at the top of the pages that outlined the "curriculum for the soul" is via the underlined word **Migration** — which leads me to a further sense of O's work as in itself a nomadic undertaking & as a thought that values the nomadic & sees it as lying at the base of culture. Michael Boughn picks up on this, quoting Olson: "Migration in fact (which is probably / as constant in history as any one thing: migration, ... always leads to a new center." Olson, Boughn goes on, "is careful to keep its feet on the ground, specifying it as 'the pursuit by animals, plants &

men of a suitable /... environment.” In that sense both Boughn & I have seen & written about parallels in Olsonian themes as expanded in Gilles Deleuze (w/ Félix Guattari) — especially starting with the 1973 — 3 years after Olson’s death — *Anti-Oedipus* and then with *A Thousand Plateaus*, a book I am certain would have delighted Olson.

In a letter to Francis Boldereff (to which I’ll come back) Olson locates a fallacy of history, writing:

to assume that, because on the plane of sociology, conditions change, that therefore nature’s forces in man and woman, on man and woman, change. What I am getting at is, that, because there was nomadism, then agriculture, then the urban, now the machine, that, therefore, all previous formularies are old-hat, no use.

And then comes back a few lines later to clarify: “that the city and the machine actually, so far as the intimate goes, produce a new nomadism, & thus NOMADS.”

Which is very close to lines of thought I pursue in & with *Nomad Poetics*, though here again Olson manages to startle me, because of that little phrase “so far as the intimate goes” — & that, as a qualifier of the production of a new nomadism, will need further investigation. Clearly — while he does speak much about migration & that involves the one & the many moving horizontally across space on the skin of earth — here he does not mean a nomadism on the “sociological plane,” but one that affects the intimate of man and woman, by which, in a first approximation, I take him to

mean the vertical, that perpendicular axis goes through us as individuals and helps define stance.

5. Diagrammatic writing — Don Byrd looks at Olson's movement away from the poem as some kind of self-contained (small or large) aesthetic unit toward a notational writing where first syntax & sentence structure collapse (important politically to get beyond the S-V-O imposition of authority via linguistic structure — & this links again to my and, say, Robert Kelly's — interest in middle voice, an action between the active & the passive, avoiding that dialectic). This writing integrates lines (as in poetry), but also information (as in essays) and moves more & more towards a diagrammatic presentation of materials, that integrates elements of but is essentially different from viz-po or concrete poetry. See for example the hand-written text on page 479 of the *Collected Poems*. Some of this also realized & carried further in Susan Howe's palimpsests.

6. New Information available: 1) The Maud/Olson library in Gloucester has recently made available the Ralph Maud Collection of all of Olson's books. You can access the database via the following URL:

<http://gloucesterwriters.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Ralph-Maud-Collection.pdf>

2) Maximus Map by Jim Cocola: https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1_XZjs1OOswlkJCL6W-oJZyR9eY0&ll=18.12693075610146%2C0&z=2

7. My last point takes us back in time to two areas Olson was hot on & we should be too: **1. Sumer & pre-Sumerian cultures** — sadly Olson didn't get the Guggenheim grant he had applied for to spend time in Iraq to do his own research & had thus to console himself with the existing scholarship. **2. Looking back to a Human possibility pre-historically given**, i.e. what cave-art can teach us. To do this quickly, I'll quote from letter #253 of 14 July 1950 (I turned 4 that Bastille day of a new-found *Liberté* but of precious little *fraternité*, or *égalité*, & certainly no *sorority*) in the Olson/Boldereff correspondence. Here Olson suggests the need for an anthology, we would call it now, of the matriarchical work of SUMER & the prepatriarchs. Some of this has been & is being done by the feminisms of this last 1/2 century. But just think of the time gained if such work had been available in say 1950 or 1955!

Noteworthy how clearly Olson draws out the active ingredients of such “another organization of human society... which we inadequately call THE MATRIARCHY,” by going to St Augustine & putting into relief the 3 punishments inflicted on women by the wrath of Poseidon after he lost to Athene in a democratic poll of the citizens:

“(1)they were to lose the vote
(2) their children were no longer to be called by their mother’s name
(3) & they were no longer to be called after their goddess,
Athenians!”

Then Olson sends us in two directions: “So: right there we have three conditions of the previous 'matriarchy' (The American Indians, particularly the Pueblo Indians give many clues)” and he goes on, “what interests me most about this here story is, that huge formless creature (formless because the PATS [—the patriarchs, the fathers —] have kept her hidden) “the GREAT GODDESS of the Iranian Plateau,

she’s the CLUE, she our SUMER

GIRL!”

Work obviously very much alive today, with an unprecedented number of women working investigatively in those areas. Linking, while overlapping & weaving together Olson’s era with contemporary workings, is among others the remarkable work of Carolee Schneeman, whose *Up to and Including Her Limits* I see as a contemporary possibility of cave painting, of creating a proprioceptive space where the artist, suspended in a rope harness, floats through space and her extended hands draw on the walls she pushes off against, creating a dense web of strokes and markings on the walls, a map of sorts of the virtual markings her body’s movement through space make and erase in the movement itself.

For me this is present today in several different incarnations: as poetry in, say, Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, Sumerian goddess in Paris subway; and in the performance work & writing of Nicole Peyrafitte that brings in Inanna and Sumerian materials — but she also throws a wider arc going back to prehistoric female representations in, for example, the cave at Gargas, all the way forward to pyrenean Occitan female shaman figures of the 19C — & doing this via the combination of body-in-movement + voiced texts to investigate what she (NP) calls "vulvic space" — & which in the space of her performance often demands also the earthy fact of cooking & feeding the people (not only their intelletto, that is, the body too, as essential).

8. Further on in that same letter Olson writes: "... the archaic or chthonic is not, and never was, horizontal and history: it is always present perpendicularly in each of us." Here now, I could move this verticality into what Olson calls the soul or the spiritual via his work on *ta'wil*, "the exegesis that leads the soul back to the truth," as Henry Corbin phrased this core Sufi thought, which, as I recently discussed with the Syrian poet Adonis is not (necessarily) anchored or even concerned with monotheistic thinking, but is the one in & of the many, the community, dancing, sitting down or not, standing, moving.

To repeat here & to close with Paul Celan's belief that poems grant us,
“momentarily, the possibility to exist, to stand.” And that was Olson's belief too, and
is mine, & maybe ours too, today. Thank you.