

Pierre Joris

WHERE IS OLSON NOW?

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

And then in sudden discoveries of something missed in years of reading & rereading Olson.

Or when returning to his work for re-confirming a hunch, usually that Olson had thought or started to think some specific problem through 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 are a few recent encounters/sightings:

1 — He is there where/when needed: 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 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 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. Throughout that century the world power meridian had shifted, moving west, from the Austro-Hungarian empire where it still teetered at the turn of the century to come finally to rest on the United States — where the poet Charles 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." "My name is NO RACE," Olson cites one of those inscriptions, 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 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 of his poems, "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 himself put it. Olson certainly is inviting the reader — of necessity the 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, that of the American space, unencumbered by history: "Put war away with time, come into space." An optimistic invitation obviously not warranted for a European poet of that time, and certainly one that could not be taken up easily by a survivor like Paul Celan, had he had the possibility of hearing it. "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, 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, it has to be imaginatively engaged in the construction of a new world. It is that forward looking, that vertical stance that I also hear in Celan's phrase: "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.”¹ That stance, that verticality, so important to the tall American Olson, so important yet so slippery to 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. The last lines of *La Préface*, once more:

We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead
crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground

The Babe
the Howling Babe

2 — In late August 2005 I visited a prehistoric cave in the French Pyrenees — the Gargas caves — & started to take notes toward a poem, & even if Olson isn’t explicitly mentioned, once the notes were typed up, it became indispensable to try to think (what is still unfinished) through with Olson’s sense of history / Pleistocene / a human universe in mind:

THE SANCTUARY OF HANDS

1.
to cut beneath the humdrum
to get language on the road
to dig through the layers
from last night’s lost dream to

a Byzantine arch six hundred
years old, a carefully
constructed something, a
Ciceronian sentence, a habit
of daily diagnostics meant
to work language
mano a mano
to breckel (*letzebuergesch* for) to
crumble it between
thumb and forefinger into
crumbs to feed the pigeons
& geese that press close in
the elaborate-starved gang-
ways of hunger-mind.

2.

mano a mano into the double
cave of Gargas
his fiction is of wild-he
& here the Commune of Aventignan,
is propriétaire & gestionnaire *of the mouth*
of that earhly swallowing-up.
Herein the long conduit
hands on walls
blown clear shadows against
stone all dated 27000
years ago give or take
four centuries.

The countdown gives
of 231 paintings of hands,

in negative outline & positive imprint, 114
show mutilations of one or more fingers,
only ten are show no
deficiency in finger joints.
The remaining 107, not well enough preserved
through the millennia to allow a decision
as to whether they were mutilated or not.

There are right hands, there are left hands,
hands of women, hands of men, hands
of children

Note: all thumbs are present,
none mutilated,
ah, the opposable (self-)definition of the human —
these are

Cro-Magnon hands, fingers folded
in silent code as paint is blown
from mouth or bone to frame
a hand —

language of bent
fingers decodes the layers of
humans' understanding of
humans —

if early is primitive, claims
mutilation in savage ritual Leroi-Gourhan's
theory wants to rhyme
finger mutilations with silent
hand code signals of
Kalahari Bushmen hunters'
info re presence of game:
Three folded middle fingers
spell "gazelle", the middle alone

"giraffe", an open
hand no fingers bent says
"monkey".

or illiterate primitivism bias backed by
Catholic Church in Franco-cantabrian area

need therefore to insist on
full linguistic & symbolic competence of paleo-humans

if early is sickly, the claims
line up a delirious vademecum of modern medicine:
in the 1950ies, Paul A. Janssen championed Raynaud's disease
others ogled acute arthritis, syphilitic
arthritis, arteriosclerosis, embolism,
diabetic gangrene, obstructive thromboangiitis.

One Ali Sahly adds ainhum
(hereditary, but affecting only
the fifth finger & mainly known amongst male
Negroes in the tropics), leprosy (unlikely, because the metacarpals
do not seem
affected at Gargas), acrocyanosis,
and several afflictions such as chilblains and
rheumatism.

if early is rich culture birth read
the missing fingers joints as folded in silent
language code

for writing is early

though testing correlations for
recurring combinatorial patterns
remains to be done (find Hans Bornefeld's 1994

The Keys to the Caverns: — only one copy in this country!

But today (11/29/05) located this footnote in an article by [Paul Bouissac](#):

“Bornefeld endorses the assumption that these populations were dominated by matriarchal religions and power structures... thanks to their secret knowledge of the mechanism of solar and lunar eclipses which allowed them to make accurate predictions of incoming dangers. Having posited the gnoseological and textual nature of parietal paintings, Bornefeld undertakes to decipher their script. He starts from two well supported types of evidence ...: the fossilized fauna and the complex periodicity of the eclipses which can yield reliable data concerning, on the one hand, animal behavior for the wild species which are still extant since it is highly unlikely that their anatomical characteristics and ethology were significantly modified over the last fifty thousands years, and, on the other hand, the what, when and where of eclipses since these sidereal events can be reconstructed in the past as well as projected in the future. Bornefeld’s next plausible assumption is that there is at least a basic set of objects for which Paleolithic populations had words: sun, moon, bison, boar, horse, hart, mammoth, and the like. Then, drawing, or extrapolating from recent research into the hypothetical reconstruction of linguistic macro-families (e.g., Shevoroshkin 1989, Nichols 1992) and their possible common origin in a mother tongue (e.g., Ruhlen 1987), he tentatively proposes a list of phonetic matrices (or words) which plausibly referred to the basic set of most relevant objects in the "umwelt" of early humans. The final step consists of applying to some selected examples of recorded parietal art the same methods which enabled other decipherers to break apparently unbreakable script codes with their mixture of direct representations of referents, strings of images forming rebus, hypothesized logograms and numerals as well as conventional symbols. The differential positions (e.g., backward versus forward) or incomplete representations (e.g., headless versus backless) of animals can thus lead to a syllabic script in which, for instance, a headless "bi-son" would stand for "son" in English. Bornefeld has proposed some "traductions" whose phonetics relies on an ur-language which he assumes was spoken some 20,000 years ago in the Franco-Cantabric area and whose semantics is guided by his matricial (matriarchal) narrative. He thus puts forward the strong claim that he has partially deciphered the palaeolithic scripts which are hidden in apparently naturalistic rock art displays.”

for writing is early
as early as language
& the archeology of
morning needs credit
Cro-magnon meander

which complicates mother
— nature or capital M,
goddess, black or white —

& the shamaness knows the 'rooms
Clayton winds his way through
“In Gargas a quester writhed through, or ate mushrooms, or
fell asleep, we will never know,
he turned himself into a uterine double,
he located the sole gate of access to paradise
he dived to the bottom of the sea,
followed a bear into a grotto, had the sense to listen o
a hedgehog, we will forever know
the beautiful U-turn of his journey”

he went in a boy
came out a girl,
or vice-versa,
our first messengers,
ur-Hermes, herm-aphrodite
writes with both hands
& mouth
sings paint
through bone.

Shortly after the Gargas visit, Clayton Eshleman sent me the following email: "in case you have not read it, go to letter #253 in the olson/boldereff correspondence, when you can. i think it will delight you. clayton."

Which I did, now, late fall when I got back to these US after months in Morocco, and Olson, was there, new & fresh.

woman, oh that
Olson's demand to Boldereff
"why don't you put this history together...
she's the CLUE, she, our SUMER GIRL!
(a hot idea,
had been followed up in 1950

so that we could be done with
the "hunting hypotheses"
(there was no hunting in the caves,
the hands the hands!

Of said letter three points that seem worthwhile to put in relief here, now:

1) his definition of "history" back then (in 1950!) — a definition wld have saved many people a lot of time.

"In fact, I call it a history, but, as you know, when I use that word, I mean only the recovery, the purification of, DOCUMENT..." (p. 417)

no need for all that Hegelianism, that, left & right, has messed with the best from, say, France pre-1950 (Kojève & what Don Byrd said last night, 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-1950ies, the absolutes, idealistic or realistic, marxist or capitalist, all the way to the desperation of "the end of history" which is of course only

a tiredness, an exhaustion and a spite. A European tiredness laid over America post-1970 with the arrival of the French theorists & their Cartesian post-garde battles.

((quick addendum: for me, however it is clear that the one thinker in Europe who without knowing Olson, expanded on Olsonian themes is 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 Olson would have delighted in. Note the “nomad” theme that will come in later))

2) his suggestion to Boldereff for an anthology, we wld call it now, of the matriarchical work of SUMER & pre-pats. some of that done of course by the feminisms of sixties to eighties. But just think of the time gained if such work has been available in say, 1955 to 1960!

And 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!”

St. Augustine closed the chapter in which he relates this as follows: “What and how much could be said about this, if we had not to hasten to other things in our discourse, is obvious.” A shame he had to hasten to those other things, the Christian ones that were to bring such desolation from then until now. Olson does not elaborate further, except he does send us in two directions: the Pueblo Indians and the Sumerians, “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. For me this is present 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 of Nicole Peyrafitte that brings in Inanna and Sumerian materials via the combination of body-in-movement + voiced texts to investigate what she (NP) calls "vulvic space" — & which in the space of her performance demands also the earthy fact of cooking & feeding the people (not only their intelletto, that is, the body too, as essential). And what for me links, overlaps & weaves together these contemporary spaces with Olson's era is the ongoing 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.

3) & this maybe summed up or at least foreseen 55 years ago in that letter of July 14 1950 (I turned 4 that day, that Bastille day of a new-found *Liberté* but of precious little *fraternité*, or *égalité*, & certainly no sorority) when Olson writes:

"... the archaic or chthonic is not, and never was, horizontal and history: it is always present perpendicularly in each of us." (p.419)

And now find this quote on my e-notepad, which must be Olson, but no source indicated, and so as "anonymous" as the hands of Gargas:

“We are a perpendicular axis of planes which are constantly being intersected by horizontal planes of experience coming up from the past (coming up from the ground)... and going out to the future... it is at the innumerable points of intersection that images and events spring up.”

4) & of course why Clayton sent me the ref had to do with another perception of Olson’s locates a further fallacy of history:

“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 say “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 *A 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 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. To repeat at the close here Celan’s belief that poems grant us, “momentarily, the possibility to exist, to stand. “

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