

Since 1955, poetry or verse as some would prefer it be called has, despite all forebodings that it was dying, taken through a handful of writers in the United States, a stranglehold on established modes of thought, analysis & attention.

John Wieners, 1972

One night in a restaurant on Elmwood street, Charles [Olson] and John Wieners and Harvey [Brown] and whoever else was at our table began smoking joints. Nobody did anything about it. The revolution was underway, and poets were the political leaders. Charles was to be the president of that Republic. Later, during the summer when he tried to make the Berkeley Poetry Conference into a political convention, some, including a few of his best friends and supporters, did not return after intermission. That, really, was the end of that. When he returned to Buffalo, he raged about it at Onetto's; I'd never seen him in such agony. He had been *wrong*, he thought. But then his conviction would return and he'd curse his false friends for deserting him. There remains a marvelous "conspiracy theory" to be created about this conference and the "politics" surrounding it. As a result of Intelligence Agency action or not, by the end of 1969 all living revolutionary leadership was dead or in hiding. Rock music had met its limit at Altamont and Ed Sanders would soon investigate the "Manson Family" murders...

Recently I had a brief exchange of e-mail with a young academic who is interested in how Charles and Robert Creeley shaped their careers... Her interest strikes me as genuine. But I have been unable to communicate to her the dimension of spirit in which Charles lived and worked. There seems to be no explaining it to the next generation.

Albert Glover, March '97

If we are the seminal fluidity, then we contain already, as Whitman knew, *everything*, "diddling" (Poe) as well as the Good, however forced sometimes the dilation as seen from old heroic organization before the shit rolled like termite droppings into the load-bearing bridges for everyone to cross into Dealy Plaza, Dallas "takes us" November 22, 1963, and not only Oswald and Ruby, but Guy Bannister, Shaw, Ferrie, Bloomfield and Permindex, now Roscoe White and more aliens up from the South, Watergate's Sturgis, Union survivors up North, all those insane in Honolulu since the birth of the Nation/Hail to the Chief shot American Transcendentalism out of the feudal individual and delivered into the hands of Walt's "unprecedented average," thank you Abe, thanks Jack, now it's up to us.

John Clarke

It has been thirty-five years since the death of American poet Charles Olson in 1970, and more than fifty years since Olson failed to get a Fulbright fellowship to study Sumerian civilization in the Iraq that now features a Burger King catering to occupying American forces atop the ruins of Ur. While all the signs were there then, the country Olson lived in would be almost unrecognizable to him now, or, at the very least, fulfill his vision of where things were heading: “pejorocracy” has come to stay, and much more than “sound, itself” is “neoned” in, as Olson wrote in the first Maximus poem, written in the early 1950s. The year after he died, in 1971, following urban uprisings, the black power movement and many other insurgencies, the Winter Soldiers, made up of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, attempted to lead the country into “a turning.” But through repression, economic and psychological warfare, that “turning” instead imploded into covert wars, imprisonment on a massive scale (from 200,000 in the early 1970s to over 2 million presently), and the flexing of imperial muscle that has put us in Afghanistan, Iraq, and any number of other places Americans really have no business being. The suppression and denial of that “turning” turned us inside out, making our lives and experiences almost unrecognizable, as if they had taken place in some distant land buried by newly created needs piled up to suffocate us.

If you wore an army jacket in 1969, 1970, or 1971, it either meant you were a veteran or that you identified with the soldiers and veterans who were fighting the war against the war in Vietnam. That was still the case when I took classes at City College in New York in the mid 1970s, but becoming less so. I was younger and the draft had passed me by, but a number of the students studying Ancient Greek with me were older, survivors of the war in Vietnam and eager to find and lose themselves in texts as archaic and startling as their experiences must have been. By the late 1970s, I had set off on part of a journey through languages and places whose logical cohesion lasted close to twenty years. On the surface, this journey seemed to lead away from the poetry and ways of thinking I was most intimately connected to, away from a very rooted sense of place and language that, even as a first generation American, held deep claims on me. Yet, as I came to see, by leading more directly back to that part of me I can call home, this journey let me grapple more tenaciously with those very claims, with more tools at my disposal. Throughout, Olson’s work, so much of it still unedited, has helped me rediscover old things while finding new things that confirm my innermost sense. In a 1950 letter to Roland Mason, Olson wrote:

I am struck with the feeling that the rest of the world is just now getting what the Americans have been putting up with a long time; that we are “experienced” in the dread business of this reality — that Melville had the under-parts of what Rimbaud didn’t even know; that the Am Civil War itself was the predecessor of what this century is the international civil war of; and that the same victor now will be the gross thing which won, here, then: MATERIALISM.

For me this way back has led to the poetry I began reading as a teenager, and to a slow but ongoing immersion into Ancient America, as an essential element missing in our generalized and circumscribed histories. This shifting perspective has also meant learning how to read my own poems, to understand how to disengage from and unlearn the assumptions in which those poems have become embedded. The American poet Jack Spicer said it as well as anyone:

It's just as important to be able to understand your own poetry as someone else's. And most poets I know, including some that I admire, don't read their own poems. I mean they read them out loud to audiences but they very seldom read them back to see what the things are that would scare them about them. They just, you know, put them in orphan asylums. Grove Press and that kind of thing. Just leave them there and get fifty bucks for 'em and you know — a baby farm.

The farm analogy is not far-fetched: like genetic engineering tampering with nature, once means are available, production can become an end in itself. But it can be just as important *not* to write, *not* to follow certain paths, even those your own work clears for you. Spicer again: "And the business of being able *not* to do something, especially things which are so important to you, are you, takes a tremendous amount of patience." For me, the practice of this patience has meant working in areas I was compelled to take action in, particularly through political interventions that knowledge of languages opened up for me. Was this at the cost of poetry? Perhaps, but can poetry be the same after such encounters?

A number of the pieces in this book directly concern Charles Olson. The approach and subject matter of all of them, however, have more to do with the deeper politics of where Olson is and is not now to be found in our culture than with a particular interpretation of his thought and poetry. The general absence of Olson in the world claiming the terms of poetry for itself is quite disturbing, particularly as questions of politics have re-emerged, sometimes gingerly and other times with blunt force, in the wake of 9/11.

In an interview that Henry Ferrini, Anne Waldman and I conducted with Amiri Baraka for Ferrini's film *Poet and the City: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place*, Baraka talked about the larger significance Olson's trajectory had for him and for the culture as a whole:

To me, Olson's concept of the *polis* was just simply the idea that you had to be grounded in the concerns of the people, that the people are finally the makers of history, and that you have to be grounded in what

is historical in that sense. What are the concerns of the people? Why are they these concerns? The whole question of putting the hinge back on the door. That is, trying to find out what had been hidden from us by the emergence of this new one-sided society. That was important, particularly for me being black because I knew part of that was the connection to Africa. Where are the foundations of the world from? Charles was saying, “you have to go back, you have to go back.” One of the most important parts was language, you know, the expression of life is language, and you have to grasp languages. At the time, people were concerned about the same thing. What is language and life? What do they reveal in themselves?

The relegation of Olson to some nether world of “influential” but unread poets has occurred through any number of encoded restraining orders and forms of administrative detention that reflect the larger bureaucratic nets we are trapped in. This entrapment has enabled the terms of various debates to remain unchallenged and severely limited, cutting off areas of deeper exploration that are as vital to our sustenance as the air we breathe. Much like the intensive psychological conditioning that produced the acceptable trajectory, horizons, boundaries and limitations of discourse during the Cold War, we again find ourselves in the midst of a “one-sided” society, attacking us with a vengeance, ready to wreak havoc not only on the present and future but, most perniciously, on the lived experience of the past. This state of affairs echoes the kinds of issues Olson, almost alone, and emblematically, confronted in relation to the trial of Ezra Pound, a trial that was made to appear like a leftover from WWII but which may have been, instead, a harbinger of things to come.

In 1945, my parents, having survived the war as refugees from Yugoslavia, were living in Rome. In May of that year Pound was captured by Italian partisans and handed over to the Americans for interrogation. During the same month, as recounted by Christopher Simpson in *Blowback*, Gustav Hilger, a war criminal instrumental in SS efforts to capture and exterminate Italian Jews, surrendered to U.S. forces and was “quietly shipped to Washington D.C. for debriefing at Fort Hunt.” Far from being publicly tried as Pound would be, for the next few years Hilger “shuttled back and forth between the United States and Germany under the sponsorship of the U.S. State Department,” working under grants from the Carnegie Corporation and holding posts at Harvard’s Center for Russian Research, Johns Hopkins University and other places serving as academic CIA covers, often under the guise of “academic freedom.” While Pound was in the cage at Pisa as the “deomonstrable” traitor, another key Nazi figure, Reinhard Gehlen, “Hitler’s most senior military intelligence officer on the eastern front, surrendered to the Americans, along with his top aides.” In general, former officers, intelligence personnel and scientists were recruited to build up essential parts of American and NATO overt and covert operations, serving as key elements for the United States government in Europe and the Middle East during the Cold War. Bloodstone was the first such operation and others, including Overcast, Paperclip, Pajamas, Dwindle, Apple Pie, Panhandle, Credulity,

and Sunrise followed. As macabre and absurd as some of these titles are, the fact remains that, as Simpson writes, “in a very real sense, the men and women who engineered Bloodstone were the same ones who designed U.S. Cold war strategy for every administration from 1945 to 1963.” As the practice deepened and became part of general foreign policy, “former Nazis and collaborators on the U.S. payroll who were also fugitives from war crimes charges began to demand U.S. help in escaping abroad in return for their cooperation with — and continuous silence about — American clandestine operations.” All this should sound familiar, especially in light of the American record with the mujahadin in Pakistan and Afghanistan or Saddam Hussein in Iraq, not to mention notorious campaigns like the Phoenix Program in Vietnam, and various other “counter-revolutionary” operations in any number of places around the globe.

These “deeper politics,” in the sense poet and historian Peter Dale Scott has defined in *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, get left by the wayside again and again, as in the trial of Pound. What remains is the image of the poet through whom art’s shadowy relationship to politics can be administered, cordoned off, and used as a surrogate form of debate, like a big condom placed over the actual organs of policy decisions and their effects. As mechanisms get jump-started by events, a series of stand-ins takes up the space of the actual, making it difficult, if not impossible, to talk about things outside their categorical, propaganda function.

The case of Olson is no different. The poet can come to represent all of the inherited weight of patriarchy, or serve the cult role of priest-shaman-leader. Either way, the poet is reduced to the point of unintelligibility. The process is ubiquitous: 9/11 becomes Pearl Harbor, or vice versa, talking to the “terrorists” becomes Chamberlain appeasing Germany, and so on. While there may be wildly varying degrees of truth in any of these formulas, their deployment makes knowledge gained through experience and changes in consciousness, the only place non-technical knowledge might actually arise and matter, ever more difficult to achieve.

What are the deep politics poetry now faces? As in various past moments of political crisis, it is worth consulting the codified and official versions for clues. Looking at the 9/11 Commission Report, it becomes apparent that parts of it were written as if they had been vetted by staff members versed in literary and historiographical theory:

In composing this narrative, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit of hindsight.

Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly — with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow. Commenting on Pearl Harbor, Roberta Wohlstetter found it “much” easier *after* the event to sort the relevant from the irrelevant signals. After the event, of course, a signal is always clear; we can see what disaster it was signaling since the disaster has occurred. But before the event it is obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings.

As time passes, more documents become available, and the bare facts of what happened becomes still clearer. Yet the picture of *how* those things happened becomes harder to reimagine, as that past world, with its preoccupations and uncertainty, recedes and the remaining memories of it become colored by what happened and what was written about it later. With that caution in mind, we asked ourselves, before we judged others, whether the insights that seem apparent now would have been meaningful at the time, given the limits of what people then could reasonably have known or done.

These, of course, are really war mechanisms, primitive triggers that reorder the past to make it conform to the “logical necessity” of the present, making it clear that colonization is taking place everywhere. There can be no liberty or liberation, no “outside” (in Jack Spicer’s sense), nothing beyond an all-encompassing present that does not merely *contain* the past but *dictates* its meaning and limit. The Report’s conclusion states: “We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.” In a remarkable elaboration, in section 11.1, titled “IMAGINATION,” the new code is proposed: “Considering what was not done suggests possible ways to institutionalize imagination... It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination.”

Against continual Orwellian scenarios usually presented by liberals and progressives, perhaps it would make more sense *not* to divorce something like the 9/11 Commission Report and its recommendations from the general culture, to see it as following and not leading, as simply confirming what has already taken place these past thirty-five years in every realm of society since the end of the war in Vietnam. We can, for example, experience the “shock” of Abu Ghraib in the media divorced from the concrete, bureaucratic realities and effects of widespread domestic incarceration and its very own racism and brutality. In *Prisons: Inside the New America*, poet and novelist David Matlin, who has taught in the New York State prison system for many years, writes:

This is a triumph generating barrenness and dread at the secret core of our daily lives so tangled we don’t any longer know how exactly its touch rots everyone of us. The pictures from Abu Ghraib, swelled with perversion and self-satisfied hate, are only hints of our domestic abyss we have already perfected and begun to export. This is not a threshold looming before us as a People, it is a threshold we passed through long ago and we have been for at least two generations perfecting its ransoms.

Couldn't we go further still and use poetry itself as an example? What might "acceptable violations" be in the realm of poetry? A fairly fixed set of roles, theories, and vocabularies have already been routinized and bureaucratized by writers; adopting, using, and mouthing them will let you become a "player" in one of the many current gaming schemes. Described quite ably by Jack Spicer in a 1947 review of Henry Miller's *Remember to Remember*, this is a world in which "a reviewer, not sitting very high off the floor of the exchange finds himself casting down worried glances at the tape and hoping fervently that he is ahead of the trends of the trading." By contrast, the stakes that a poet like Spicer engaged in were of an entirely different order, one we are no longer accustomed to. As Peter Gizzi writes of Spicer: "He's less interested in a dialogue with the dead than in inhabiting the same space with them, as in a poem, a room in a pub, or on a baseball diamond. That is to say, he's more interested in sharing this space with others, putting it into play — making it public. If one opens the circuitry between the living and the dead, one has to be willing to shed the notion of social acceptability, of clearly delineated public and private realms, of property."

This comes much closer to the kinds of purposes poetry is put to by someone like Matlin. Taking the work of writers like Robert Duncan, H.D., William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson into workshops with hardened criminals, Matlin quotes Frank O'Hara, stressing how the words of poets can be used so "that one might experience the 'traumatic consciousness of emergency and crisis as personal event,' and assume responsibility for being alive 'here and now,' no matter how accidentally."

As poets, writers, artists, and intellectuals found themselves — some rapidly and others gradually — shocked into or out of recognition of public life following 9/11, a variety of issues started getting talked about in ways that hadn't been talked about at all for many years, just as old denials and suppressions returned in new guises. In one of the most acute pieces posted on the Buffalo poetics list, the poet Taylor Brady wrote the following in response to a post by literary critic Marjorie Perloff:

I'm disappointed that your warning against too-broad strokes and too-hasty judgment only seems to apply from the inside out, as if history were a one-way mirror in which certain groups bear the burden of a constant agonized self-reflection, while others survey the scene of this inspection and pronounce on its correctness. And I regret that the internalization of this model kept many of us on the left from articulating a reasoned response, kept us talking about respectful silences and periods of mourning, not wishing to appear unseemly, in the crucial first hours during which the Bush administration prepared for war.

Amiri Baraka's poem "Somebody Blew Up America" came along to work as a perfect test balloon,

forcing buried issues out of hiding, putting poetry in the news and pushing hard at this separation of “public and private realms,” at the ownership and propriety of emotions and ideas, at all the “reasoned response” and “respectful silences.” People who hadn’t objected to or been outraged at the many information gaps regarding 9/11 or the call to war (as well as all kinds of other things), suddenly found ample strength to voice their outrage over a mere poem, over whether one or two of its dozens of assertions were or were not “factual.”

This division over poetry brings us back to Olson’s public performance at the Berkeley Poetry Conference of 1965, an event that Baraka, then Leroi Jones, had been invited to but was absent from. The conference was held in July. Malcolm X had been assassinated in February, a night described by Baraka in his autobiography:

February 21, 1965, a Sunday. Nellie and I and the two girls were at the Eighth Street Bookstore, at a book party. I had a cap, hunting jacket, and round dark glasses, the dress of our little core. I was being personable and knowledgeable... Suddenly, Leroy McLucas came in. He was weeping. “Malcolm is dead! Malcolm is dead! Malcolm’s been killed!” He wept, repeating it over and over. I was stunned. I felt stupid, ugly, useless.

Soon, in what became a symbolically charged and very reductively interpreted event, Baraka moved out of the bohemia of downtown New York to Harlem:

The arrival uptown, Harlem, can only be summed up by the feelings jumping out of Césaire’s *Return to My Native Land* or Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* or Cabral’s *Return to the Source*. The middle-class intellectual, having outintegrated the most integrated, now plunges headlong back into what he perceives as blackest, native-est... When we came up out of the subway, March 1965, cold and clear, Harlem all around us staring us down, we felt like pioneers of the new order.

In a remarkably poignant moment caught on film in the out-takes of the National Educational Television show on Olson, there is a shot of Olson shuffling through papers to get at a letter from Baraka; as he picks it up, Olson says something like “how could anyone refuse such a call,” alluding to the sense of allegiance Baraka felt towards Malcolm X, and his need to move out of the world he had inhabited and into the world Malcolm was no longer in. Fittingly, Nathaniel Mackey, a poet who is heir to the legacies of both Olson and Baraka, has described Olson’s utterances at Berkeley with rare intelligence, political acuity and historical sensitivity:

Poets of my generation tend to look askance at the large claims for the poet that poets like Olson and Duncan make, especially where they warm over romantic senses of the poet's mission or smack of moralizing self-aggrandizement. It is as though the analogy they draw between the poet and the politician boomerangs, what they say sounding like campaign rhetoric at times, as hollow as a political candidate's claim to integrity. What strengthens Olson's position and protects it against the charge of naiveté, however, is his willingness to acknowledge himself to be an heir to the corrupt power he condemns. He can own up to certain spoils the poet gathers from the workings of that power, can admit, as we have seen, that imperialism gives "a language the international power / poets take advantage of." In this we see the workings of not a clean but a troubled conscience.

Olson sometimes speaks of political power as something from which he is excluded, promoting a sense of a priori exclusion as a way of confirming his poetic vocation. But there is another side of his thought that admits that for a white male poet like himself, born in a white-supremacist, male-supremacist society, political power, relatively speaking, is a birthright from which he isn't excluded but about which he has to make a choice. A man who was once on the threshold of a political career, as he was in the 1940s, more believably speaks of renunciation than of exclusion. That is exactly what we find him doing, exhorting others to choose "to be these things instead of Kings." For him poetry is analogous to a vow of poverty, a moral act of renunciation, as he writes very early in *The Maximus Poems*:

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it
take the way of
the lowest,
including
your legs, go
contrary, go
sing

The sense of poetry as something like a form of penance makes it a matter of conscience, his way of sublimating or attempting to sabotage his birthright, the complex of privileges and guilts we can, with Amiri Baraka, call white karma. At the Berkeley conference Olson makes an interesting remark: "I'm the white man. I'm that famous thing, the white man. The ultimate paleface. The noncorruptible, the good. The thing that runs this country, or that is this country. And thank God — And in fact the only advantage I have is that I didn't." His righteousness, what here he calls his "advantage," consists only of abstention, of writing poetry in place of running the country. (*Paracritical Hinge*; pp. 89-90)

Even though Olson declared himself "the ultimate paleface" at Berkeley, some of the people most affected by the risk Olson enacted on stage were those in the Detroit contingent, including the legendary writer and activist John Sinclair, one of the founders of the Detroit Artists' Workshop and, later, the White Panthers; Sinclair would come to be closely associated with the MC5, who would prove to be a crucial influence on the punk movement. His introduction to Olson came with a reading of "Projective Verse" in

1964, followed by Olson's inclusion in Donald Allen's defining anthology *The New American Poetry*. In his introduction to the Collected Artists Worksheets, Sinclair wrote:

The beautiful thing about the whole "movement" here in Detroit is that we all started equally — we were literally "nowhere," and we have somehow been able to make a very precise place for ourselves in this city, solely through our efforts, making all the "mistakes" we had to make, taking all the chances we didn't even know *were* chances.

Sinclair read, with Ed Sanders, at the Berkeley Poetry Conference and, by 1968, was to become a figure of national prominence, at the forefront of new political alliances between movements like the Black Panthers and white radicals. Another member of the Detroit contingent, poet and film-maker Robin Eichele, one of the co-founders of the Artists' Workshop, along with Sinclair, his partner and then wife the artist and photographer Leni Arndt, trumpeter Charles Moore, and another dozen artists working in different forms, described his experience of Olson's performance:

So, it was a political convention, a rite of veneration, confession, immolation, or whatever you want to drop on it for a name. It doesn't really matter much. It was Olson, in public, putting his edge to the world and heaving, cutting deep and wide at the dictate of his concerns. He ran a lot of people out (invited them to leave if they didn't like the program) and did do violence to the poems as poems. But, for me, once I got on to what he was up to, he had me on his vector, holding on where I could, but riding that wave of energy and joy as it broke wildly in all directions. It broke a lot loose in me, merely by its form, how the man does slice into something (everything) and does work to be that inclusive of the universe. He stood as he says, taking on the risk of a public place, Discrimination on his left shoulder, Exaggeration ("the only question in poetry is how to exaggerate") on his right shoulder, and as he was reminded when he strayed from the podium, a microphone (the hold of the Virgin Mary as he called it) at his neck.

Olson's event at Berkeley took place on July 23, 1965, and it would be hard not to see a parallel in Bob Dylan's performance at Newport two days later, on July 25th, when he went electric, much to the chagrin of a segment of the audience. Just as Eichele describes Olson doing "violence to the poems as poems" and running "a lot of people out," the response to Dylan's performance has taken on the quality of a momentous divide. Dylan's own comments on what took place seem pertinent here: "Whatever it was about wasn't about anything they were hearing. I had a perspective on the booing, because you've got to realize you can kill somebody with kindness too." For some in the audience, like Eichele or Anne Waldman, Olson's refusal to read his poems "properly" redefined the very terms of the poet's public role. At the same time, Olson became a reference point for what might be possible in spheres of activity seemingly far removed from poetry. As Wayne Kramer, one of the founders of the MC5 recounts:

We had been championing Detroit music for years. "High Energy" is how we described it at the time - no

holds barred, pedal to the metal. Combining the R&B we heard on WJLB and WCHB, the blues of Howlin' Wolf and John Lee, the new sounds coming in from the Rolling Stones and The Who and the Yardbirds, and the powerful force of the avant-garde "free-jazz movement," we toiled away in small clubs all over the Midwest. Night after night, we worked at perfecting our sound and our stage show. The music was in our blood, and it dripped everywhere. It was very messy. We rehearsed in a storefront studio in the Cass corridor (we called it the Warren/Forest then). It's on the corner where East Warren Avenue meets the John C. Lodge Expressway in the "inner city" of Detroit. The district was close to Wayne State University and was a little rundown. There were cheap rents and a general feeling of "live and let live." North of this, on the corner, was a series of two-story commercial structures with storefronts below and what used to be a dentist's office above. The reefer smoke billowed out of these buildings. The storefronts housed the Detroit office of the Committee To End the War in Vietnam, the Fifth Estate (the underground newspaper), the Artists Workshop and, later, the MC5's rehearsal space. The upstairs became the band's communal home. From there I watched the city of Detroit go to war in the riots of the long hot summer of 1967. I watched tanks and armored personnel carriers from my bedroom window. Tanks rolling across Warren Avenue. I was arrested by the Army just up the street for being a suspected sniper - I had a telescope in my window... That corner in Detroit was, for me at least, the center of the known universe. Late nights were spent tripping on acid, smoking the best Mexican herb to be found, listening to Sun Ra, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, and plotting the future. Our political idols were the Black Panther Party and crazed poets like Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and Ed Sanders.

The question of decorum gets to the heart of acceptable speech, acceptable public behavior, the institutional life of writing, and the reach a poet's take on the universe can have. Such descriptions, and the one to follow, come closer to a truer sense of how Olson's energies and thought incited people, from "nowhere," to question models that had been handed down to them, to take up the responsibilities of their own inquiries and visions. Describing Olson's arrival in Buffalo for a teaching position in 1963, Michael Boughn writes:

All this work was implicated in a move away from what we think of as the "literary," finally claiming for poetry an altogether other range of importance. What Olson founded in Buffalo, what followed from his arrival there, begins with that. "Literary" in this context, that is both Olson's work and the work he engendered in Buffalo, has to do with two different but related issues. It refers both to the conventions, modes and procedures of writing that mark, however broadly and ambiguously, what is proposed at any given moment as "literature," and also with the "life worlds" such practices are implicated with, something loosely called, say, the "literary life," complete with all its competitions, prizes, career paths, disciplinary bodies, canonical aspirations, and so on. The literary, then, as an institution, as institutionalized practices. Crucial to Olson's sense of a move beyond or around the literary is his notion that it's possible to reconnect with or recover energies that pre-exist their historical institutionalization into a specific, fixed grammar of social practices. And even more importantly, that to do that, to push one's self toward that connection, is to disrupt or alter that grammar, a profoundly political act.

It was the same quality that first attracted Baraka:

What fascinated me about Olson was his sense of having dropped out of the US, the “pejorocracy.” He said in his poems we should “go against” it. That we should oppose “those who advertise you out”.

Such politics, or political acts, found themselves enacted in various ways: in Detroit, through the activities of a group of young poets, musicians, film-makers, and visual artists; through the Institute for Further Studies in Buffalo; through the Frontier Press in Cleveland, with its essential list of reprinted classics and new poetry including *The New Empire* by Brooks Adams, *Peace Eye* by Ed Sanders, the Situationist text *Decline & Fall of the “Spectacular” Commodity-Economy*, *Paths of the Mound-Building Indians and Great Game Animals* by Archer Butler Hulbert, *Years of Madness: A Reappraisal of the Civil War* by W.E. Woodward, *Interlinear to Cabeza de Vaca* by Haniel Long, *The Book of Daniel Drew*, *Prison Memoirs of An Anarchist* by Alexander Berkman, *Spring & All* by William Carlos Williams, *Hermetic Definitions* by H.D., and books by Ed Dorn, Stan Brakhage, Michael McClure, and others; through the activities of Ed Sanders, as a member of the Fugs, owner of the Peace Eye Bookstore, and editor of *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*; through the work of Dennis Tedlock, scholar and translator of the *Popol Vuh* who, in his preface to *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians*, wrote: “I see the book in part as a contribution to the ongoing reopening of the ear and voice that Charles Olson called for all the way back in 1950, when he said that poetry must ‘catch up and put into it certain laws and possibilities of the breath’” There are many, many further instances, both collectively and individually.

In attempting not to romanticize the immediate past of our poetics and its history of struggle, or using that past to bludgeon the present or this present to belittle that past, the pieces that follow have taken shape and come together as part of an ongoing project, an investigative poetics whose principles and dangers were outlined by Muriel Rukeyser in 1949:

There has been a great deal of political talk about security in this century. Growth is the security of organic life. The security of the imagination lies in calling, all our lives, for more liberty, more rebellion, more belief.

Once the open call to bureaucratize imagination becomes a cornerstone of the security state and society, how, as Olson put it, are we to “write a Republic” and “initiate another kind of nation”? While his republic was meant to come after having “descried the nation,” to be written “in gloom on Watch-House Point,” such a precise location, even as isolated as it was, now seems almost like an unattainable luxury.

Have we reached a frontier *beyond* the past? As far back as 1941, the geographer Carl Sauer wrote:

Year by year the sweeping hands of modern industry and commerce brush away more and more of what is old. Traditions die with the old people; documents are destroyed; weather, storm, and flood erase the physical remnants; science and market standardization destroy old crops.

Sauer's response was to write of what he called "the old truth":

The terrific impact of the modern western world, however, does not repeal the old truth that the history of man has been markedly pluralistic, and that there are no general laws of society, but only cultural assents. We deal not with Culture but with cultures, except so far as we delude ourselves into thinking the world made over in our own image... From all the earth in all the time of human existence, we build a retrospective science, which out of this experience acquires an ability to look ahead.

While Sauer believed in "the relevance of all human time," that it "may require a lifetime given to learning one major context of nature and culture," does anyone have this kind of time anymore? Or has the velocity of change and consumption, through some law of diminishing returns linked to the depletion of the planet's basic life sustaining resources, overtaken our ability to stay in one place and allow ourselves the kind of idleness local knowledge demands?

We are, clearly, in a bind. We certainly are at war, though at wildly divergent levels of engagement and enlistment. In *Call Me Ishmael*, Charles Olson wrote that Melville understood "America completes her West only on the coast of Asia." Perhaps westward expansion for the United States ends after the Vietnam War, with sneaker factories named after Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. The current effort to destroy Babylon by remaking it in our own image is aimed at nothing less than eradicating the more likely site of the garden of Eden and displacing it to the northwest, to the Middle East's "only democracy," the land of uprooted olive trees and legalized torture. But these are just details in a much larger drama Olson had the sheer will to anticipate, delve into, record, and, ultimately, give his life over to. As André Spears writes:

What emerges in the manifest exorbitance of the *Maximus* poems is the central drama of humanity's intimate relation to a living, "migrating" earth... Human migration, for Olson, finds its archetype in the tectonic life of earth itself... Against a zodiacal grid of the universe, the narrative drive of the *Maximus* poems — "the end of Pisces/could be the end of species" (M 452) — culminates in a vision of planet Earth in which the North-Western migration of Western civilization parallels the movement of continental drift, and functions as the representation of a gravitational or magnetic pull toward the arctic fulcrum

about which the continents continue to rotate. This teleological locus, in turn, is the site of the periodic glaciations — literally, the “ice” in the Ice Ages — that shape the course of human evolution.

To acknowledge the cosmic, cataclysmic nature of these possibilities is not to give up on politics. On the contrary, it is to return politics to the concerns and experiences of the cosmos and the concerns and experiences of daily life, wherever it is lived. It is at this intersection that the thinking some poetry can enact offers ways out of prescribed scripts and responses.

Simplistic readings that see Olson following in the footsteps of the long poems of Pound and Williams in an effort to create a modern or postmodern epic, completely fail to comprehend the grasp Olson had on the relationship between forms of writing and the larger social and spatial structures in the world such forms parallel and enact. Such a misreading of Olson, I would contend, is then compounded when trying to get at what a whole generation of women poets that follow or contend with him are doing.

In Alice Notley’s *The Descent of Alette*, it is form which must be wrested away from the tyrant:

“He owns form,” “doesn’t he?” “The tyrant” “owns form”

As Notley tells “a public story” that might “recover some sense of what mind was like before Homer, before the world went haywire & women were denied participation in the design & making of it,” it is form itself which is crucial. To seize form back might mean to change the order of things, to inhabit roles in order to refuse them: who and what we commit ourselves to makes all the difference. But so does the question of where, how and into what we are “born.” As she writes:

“When I was born,” “I was born now” “fully grown,” “on heroin” “When I was born” “fully grown” “in the universe” “of no change” “nothing” “grows up from” (“Who sings this, whose voice?” “This person” “is in a shadow” “down at the end of” “the platform” “I can’t see him” “at all” “He continues

his song:”) “When I was born,” “I was now” “When I was born,” “I’m not allowed” “to remember when I was” “the little baby” “in a darkness, joy of darkness” “Was I the cub” “for an instant?” “if so” “only an instant,” “before I” “was a soldier” “before I” “was a soldier...”

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