

Introduction

BY ROBERT CREELEY

I have no apology to make for the friendship with Charles Olson that, veritably, changed my life. I was twenty-four as I remember, looking for material where-with to produce with college friend Jacob Leed yet another “little magazine” of the period to be called the *Lititz Review*. We never managed to print it, but many of the associations and works thus solicited went into Cid Corman’s *Origin*, the great collective finally for us all. It was Cid’s friend Vincent Ferrini who put me in touch with Charles Olson. It wasn’t until some other friend asked if he were the same Olson who had written the book on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*, that I had any idea he was not—as I was—another fledgling writer, for the most part unpublished and unknown. When I found the book and read it, I was astounded—and to some degree depressed. How could I possibly find company with someone so singularly, generously brilliant, so evidently accomplished? I couldn’t be simply his sidekick or straight man. Nor his disciple ever. We had to be equals, which is really what Olson here says to all who read him—and what we share as a sense of person from a place, New England. Like the *Pequod*’s crew, we are fact of a democracy which does not think itself as such but so functions. We believe in knowing, *gnosis*, we take our various worlds as a primary. We read the literal books of our lives.

Given such a life as his was, what’s here collected, as Benjamin Friedlander writes on a postcard while working on Olson’s papers at the library where they are kept, is only the tip of the iceberg.

Two days rooting through CO’s carbon papers makes me feel at once ghoulish (as if it were the tissue of his skin I were peeling back to see in—“God’s flesh,” the “eternal,” as he in one spot accuses all of us—including himself—of wanting to chew) at the same time more excited than ever, as if the unread Olson were the necessary 3/4 submerged berg making possible the 1/4 ice floe, I a diver feeling along the murky depths the crevice that tore the hull of many a sea-worthy ship.

He continues, "Well stupid Romance of the reader (me) . . ." And yet it is here that any of us has to begin, at this insistent edge of *outside* and *inside*, this place which Olson's most initiating source, Herman Melville, puts in a way uncannily like Friedlander's:

. . . Hard Berg (methought), so cold, so vast,
With mortal damps self-overcast;
Exhaling still thy dankish breath—
Adrift dissolving, bound for death;
Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one—
A lumbering lubbard loitering slow,
Impingers rue thee and go down,
Sounding thy precipice below,
Nor stir the slimey slug that sprawls
Along thy dead indifference of walls.

"The Berg," *John Marr and Other Sailors*, 1888

Such a depth is present in all that Olson writes. His study of Herman Melville's work becomes its complement in the brilliant casts of premise and particulars, its rhetorical confidence, and, uniquely, its exceptional ability to compact and identify the fact of our common humanity in, as Olson called his own era, "a late time." Again and again he comes "back to the geography of it," that human "landscape," which must be given "out . . . of this low eyeview, size." He is manifest of an *inside* that of necessity bears itself, discovers its own measure, maps a world "not discovera" unless initial in fact.

Mapping in all its senses and applications is a primary act both for Olson and for those to whom he pays attention. One recognizes quickly that it is not simply a romantic enterprise he is drawn to, but the need to know by means of determined *process*, to have been there, as Herodotus got there literally, to make a record of the fact of having witnessed one's self, or heard, or felt, or seen, something uniquely specific to the fact one hoped to make particular. I think the literary disposition is here most distorting of Olson's ways of proceeding, in that it has the habit of categories in no sense useful to him, reads story as fiction, or thinks of facts as generally distributable. Anyone so persuaded is apart, in mind, put it, from that which he or she has presumed to use as center.

So, for example, Olson fought fiercely against the widening of a street in his home town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. He knew that "habits and haunts"

were never merely conveniences, something to be got by purchase or intent. Such incremental “world” was all that could and did remain of so much of “history,” a submerged ledge of previous uses offering the only way back or forward. If one moved the road, then one changed unwittingly the consequence of those who had traveled it. Their “mapping” was overwritten, their particular means destroyed. Simply there is no way in which such change can be accommodated and not erase the previous condition, whether it be a “leisure” occupying shores previously committed to fishing or just a common, unintentional dismissal—as in “THE GULF OF MAINE,” which Olson ends with this wry comment:

. . . their knees
were smashed
on small rocks
as their poor pinnacle likewise poorly lay

chawn mostly but some parts of her bruised sides
now resting on the sands where we shall
dig them up and set them upright as posts
at just the signal place for tourists
to come by and not give one idea

why such odd culls
stand along a fishing
shore
though not used much at the present time
and mostly well-dressed persons
frequent it

“THE GULF OF MAINE,” *The Maximus Poems*, 1983

Olson’s emphatic dislike of that which can so empty the effective authority of its source is very evident throughout his work, whether it be the contempt he feels for those “learned monsters whom people are led to think ‘know’” in the second part of “Human Universe” or else the more specific qualifying he does in his comments on Cyrus Gordon and “the scholar” in “Homer and Bible.” His attack is a constant throughout the early *Maximus Poems* and in others as “Letter for Melville 1951,” wherein all the accumulated anger prompted by such misappropriation finds a voice. Inevitably he feels also a bitterness at seeing his own work either plagiarized or else made trivial. Such

perverse professionalism is a condition he attacks all his life, and in every possible context. One may remember that he chooses to leave his employment with the Democratic Party after Roosevelt's death, because the "merchandise men" he will have to accept as defining company frustrate entirely any prospect of the art, and the vision of its possibilities, he takes as his own. So, as Tom Clark's *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* notes, "Over the next three days he began work in earnest, producing several thousand words upon which he would eventually build Part One of *Call Me Ishmael*."

That text appropriately begins this collection. Immediately the apparent givens of our habitual world shift of necessity. "Put war away with time, come into space," he writes in a poem May 1946 ("La Preface"). There is no place made secure by a justifying history, nor any refuge from which to look out, objectively, upon the world's event. That curious, collapsing *sidedness*, that proposal one could be divided from what, in fact, a physical life made whole, fails altogether in Olson's thinking. Most clearly put in an introduction to *Additional Prose* by his fellow poet and friend Robert Duncan (though not published with Olson's text), "We have nowhere else to be than here, in this first history, in which vast extensions of meaning, trance, and fantasy, alchemistries of language, take over."

He [Olson] goes "back," back home, to come into the depths of the Immediate, going over the documents and old maps, the texts of the sciences and the historical diggings, as data of what our species is, read in the light and dark of a Divine Intention. He wants to establish us, to re-establish us in the Ideal, to redeem all idealism from the commitments that claim prior authority there. "Otherwise the present will lose what America is the inheritor of: a secularization which not only loses nothing of the divine but by seeing process in reality redeems all idealism from theocracy or mobocracy, whether it is rational or superstitious, whether it is democratic or socialism."

"As an Introduction: Charles Olson's *Additional Prose*"

Much of the literary questioning of Olson's work is based upon the presumption that literature is attendant to what one otherwise thinks of as actual. It is the familiar sense of "holding a mirror up to life," making of literature a reflective act which has as its most decisive effect a seemingly accurate description or judgment of that which it so addresses. "To tell what subsequently I saw and what heard," in William Carlos Williams's phrase, would be its most signifi-

cant disposition, the act of testament, of bearing witness to an otherwise unacknowledged world.

But that very word (“world”) in its own history makes emphatic that a world is never other than a human life, that it is, quite literally, the *vir eld*, that length of time we are given to live and what we know by means of it. Hence philosophy, aesthetics, the sciences, all the accumulating judgments and categorizings, together, constitute what we’ve made humanly of the experience of living. Nothing more, nothing less. But it all stays curiously separate in mind from that which it so engages, that “world which is raging and yet apart,” as D. H. Lawrence said. This assumption of an objectivity is what Olson qualifies as the “universe of discourse,” the sense that there is a world and then there is the discussion of that world—and that, curiously, these two constitute distinctly specific authorities, however complementary.

But as Robert Duncan also writes in his exceptionally useful relation of Olson’s work, “Our generation has had the duty to carry in our work the content of an excluded knowledge, to work at a ‘bridgework’ between the repressed content and the Consciousness that is Self.”

Charles Olson must work at ground work as an educator against a massive and repressive construct in which all the sciences of Man outside of the post-Christian rationalizing science of “EUROPE” have been declared to be out-of-bounds. Blasting at indoctrination, Olson blasts with a thunderous indoctrination. He insists that it must be dogmatic. A Roman Catholic in origin, he transforms the meaning of Catholicity to mean just that—*katha holos*, having to do with the whole of Mankind, to be the idea of Man in the whole of Man.

Bizarre that we can so live in the imagination of our “world” and yet so bitterly contest any sense that it is not the actual one, or perhaps more aptly, the right one. I wonder that my own generation, having come of age in the cataclysmic “image” of order which was World War II, finds such difficulty in considering any alternative, in recognizing that it indeed might be otherwise, that the possible devastation of all worlds might be the mind awry and not simply a fact of nature. Or if it is such a fact, if our convulsion and self-immolation are “organic,” then how do we think ourselves to be, and for what conceivable reason? Have all such questions been answered? Or do they even continue to matter.

Charles Olson is a great poet for many reasons. Because he was fact of his

own insistence, "Come into the world." Because he read across the endless divisions of "subject," of a thinking that determined its authority by an ability to isolate and categorize. Because he did not stay put in a "lyricism—one wants it clear by now that the lyric is the ripple that precedes the Klassical reaching the shore." He abhorred epicene poets, those who stay comfortable within a given authority, no matter its character. He shared deeply with John Winthrop a sense that men and women can care about the kind of world they live in.

There is finally no reason to be impartial here at all. One is fighting for one's life and always was. I miss so much the ranging, particularizing, intensely conjecturing mind he had. Sans mind, no direction—just a rudderless drift. You had to be *minded*, he said. I think of my small town West Acton and his mill-town Worcester, and the ocean out there beyond either one of us with its incessant, shifting "place." As he said to Elaine Feinstein, "Orientate me." I loved that word—locate me, put me in the picture, draw me a map. What is poetry ever but such making, the *imago mundi*, the home we have? There are few collections of anything as powerfully engaged as are his sorties here, his impeccable propositions, his insistent engagement with what one *can* know, given attention and the heart to keep it particular.

His talk was the same. You hear it here in the pace, the "walking," the unremitting curiosity without which, as Pound emphasized, there can be no literature at all. In answer to a standard questionnaire, Charles Olson called himself "archaeologist of morning," a time still possible, still initial, still to be found. He wrote also that he had sacrificed everything, all the imagined blessings of a life, in order to achieve concentration. Here it is as if all had returned, to be again that immeasurable intensity, to think of the world and to enter it.