

WHERE DOES OLSON STAND NOW? *Poetics and Precarity*, Charles Olson and American modernism, and the 50th anniversary edition of *Gunslinger*

By Patrick James Dunagan

Poetics and Precarity

The University at Buffalo Robert Creeley Lectures in Poetry and Poetics

edited by Myung Mi Kim and

Cristanne Miller

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Charles Olson and American Modernism

The Practice of the Self

by Mark Byers

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Gunslinger

50th Anniversary Edition

by Edward Dorn

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The rather jittery history of the 10-year rise and fall of the Charles Olson Memorial Lectures at the University at Buffalo has been extensively covered at *Dispatches* by Michael Boughn. Into the mix arrives *Poetics and Precarity* the inaugural volume in a new series trumpeting The University at Buffalo Robert Creeley Lectures in Poetry and Poetics. It was Creeley himself of course who originally developed and oversaw the Olson lectures during his epoch-defining tenure at Buffalo until they became, as Boughn describes, a predestined casualty of the “battleground in the poetry war over the nature of Olson’s work and the legacy of his poetics.” Perhaps it’s not entirely surprisingly then that the editors of this volume make no mention of the

precursor lecture series—and little of Olson—in their introduction. Yet it's an interesting historical slip to say the least, especially as they gloss over much of the period and sequence of events surrounding “the poetry war” referenced by Boughn.

Olson's work is nevertheless absolutely central to Nathaniel Mackey's inaugural Creeley Lecture “Breath and Precarity” which opens the collection and serves as center piece. The text of Mackey's lecture is followed by a range of essays, some but not all engaging with Mackey, none however sharing his comfortable embrace of Olson: “The Ga(s)p” M. NourbeSe Philip; “Precarity Shared: Breathing as Tactic in Air's Uneven Commons” Jennifer Scappettone; “On Not Missing It” Elizabeth Willis; “Here and Elsewhere: Creeley's Notions of Community and Teaching as Circulation” Vincent Broqua; “Constructive Alterities & the Agonistic Feminine” Joan Retallack; “Precarity, Poetry, and the Practice of Countermapping” Adalaide Morris and Stephen Voyce; “Supine, Prone, Precarious” Sarah Dowling; “The Opening of the (Transnational Battle) Field” Heriberto Yépez; and there are some appendixes, the most useful being “Poetry in the Making: A Bibliography of Publications by Graduate Students in the Poetics Program, 1991–2016” James Maynard, the other two being a Schedule for the Robert Creeley Lecture and Celebration of Poetry, April 7–10, 2016 and the Seminar Topics and Participants for the conference “Poetics: (The Next) 25 Years” held April 9–10, 2016.

Mackey describes how “as I was coming of age aesthetically, breath was in the air. What I'm referring to is an emphasis or an accent on breath and breathing that came into experimental poetics in the United States during the 1950 and 1960s.” This “in the air” development he readily acknowledges as being directly aligned with the influential phenomenon of Olson's 1950 essay

“Projective Verse” (along with the work of Allen Ginsberg, Amiri “Leroi Jones” Baraka, and other poets in Donald Allen’s seminal *New American poetry: 1945-1960*). To his ear there’s strong correlation between Olson & co.’s poetics and free jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor’s writings:

“I likewise heard something very specific, Olson’s open field composition or composition by field and Robert Duncan’s *The Opening of the Field*, at the outset of Taylor’s liner notes to his album *Unit Structures*: ‘The first level or statement of three an open field of question, how large it ought or ought not to be.’ I heard something very specific, the poetics of breath, in the title of those notes, ‘Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture.’”

Mackey’s recognition of Olson’s centrality as an important precursor to his own work is made obviously apparent. Olson’s language serving as metaphoric bridge for Mackey’s own poetry and the musical jazz tradition found strung throughout it: “Music, like speech, is made of breath. Breath is music’s open secret. To linger with its disclosure, insist on and belabor its indispensability, is a signal impulse found in the music we call jazz.”

Mackey cites Baraka’s description of jazz artist Pharoah Sanders incorporating the breathing principles of yoga into his playing in order “to work breathing and breath in such a way as to highlight vulnerable and volatile flesh and blood, violable flesh and bone.” Making clear that implicit as well as explicit to this are recent Black Lives Matter protests, that were sparked off in part by Eric Garner’s last words “I can’t breathe”:

“Black music says, as does an allied, radically pneumatic poetics, that breath, especially imperiled breath, matters. It insists that we can, for a time at least, breathe, that what we do with breath, from which, to belabor the obvious, animacy, agency and all possibility of action arise, matters most.”

In short, Mackey’s talk is a remarkably astute recognition and call to action of a poetics for social change, “black is the color of precarity itself”, while also being a tour de force looking

back upon his own work and tracing its development as directly tied to “a confluence of black music and experimental poetics” in large part developed from out Olson’s ideas.

Olson however does not fare well in the included commentaries appearing after Mackey’s lecture. Jennifer Scappetone is grudgingly forced to note how despite “the ableist and patriarchal presumptions of Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’” Mackey’s lecture is found to be “expanding the political horizons of Olson’s ‘verse’ through rectifying emphasis on performing against, and as, sociopolitical duress.” This is followed by Elizabeth Willis’s rather bewildering declaration: “Robert Creeley was our Ishmael---survivor of the Olsonian shipwreck. The one who took responsibility not only for escaping to tell us, but for making something of the shipwreck. For making something new from what was left of the ship.” And finally there is Heriberto Yépez’s near incoherent “transnational” poetic screed over how novelist William Burroughs “wasn’t the only North American experimental writer who thought the ‘American Dream’ was located in Mexico. Most famously, Olson and Kerouac had also Mexican episodes in the fifties.”

All the anti-Olson rhetoric is a bit much. Even more so given that Willis also remarks on how while at Buffalo as a student she studied Blake with professor John “Jack” Clarke and worked on Robert Duncan’s papers with fellow students Boughn and Lisa Jarnot. All three are key players in whatever might constitute the idea of the “Olsonian shipwreck”. Clarke having masterminded the multi-generational collaborative work *A Curriculum of the Soul* composed of twenty-eight fascicles on a set of keyword topics he identified from a writing of Olson’s. These were delivered by a range of individual poets, including Clarke on *Blake*, Boughn on *Mind*, Jarnot on *Language*, and, for that matter, Duncan on *Dante*.

The Creeley lectures at any rate continue. Jerome McGann delivered the second on “Reading poetry” and Lisa Robertson is set to deliver the third on “11th-13th century poetries in the Occitan language.” It’s rather fascinating to imagine that if these talks continue in similar vein as they have so far (Mackey on *Breath*, McGann on *Reading*, Robertson on *the Occitan*, etc.) that perhaps in few decades they’ll all be gathered together and published as a single volume. How reminiscent the list of titles contained therein might appear to the fascicles constituting *A Curriculum of the Soul* that similarly multi-decade communal collaborative text *salvaged*—it seems would be the right word for Willis—from out that “Olsonian shipwreck” that *is* Buffalo.

No matter, the scholarly crowd ranting against Olson will surely remain unfazed by such a book of collected Creeley lectures. As with their handling of Mackey’s talk, such a projected volume would without doubt be met with a convenient glazing over of the historical record concerning Olson along with any resemblance to *A Curriculum of the Soul*. Yet as the facts would rightfully have it, the scholarly world is not fully shuttered up against Olson. *Charles Olson and American modernism* by Mark Byers demonstrates that Olson bashing has not become a universally shared practice. Perceptively describing how Olson’s work sets out “a critique of Enlightenment reason and a search for social change in a radical ‘practice of the self’ which was at once embodied, perceptual and political” Byers advances an argument quite complimentary to that of Mackey.

Byers draws fresh attention to Olson’s developing years as a poet, situating him within his own generation of fellow artists coming into their own post-WWII, figures who grew to form the “New York Schools” of Abstract Expressionist painters and the experimental-leaning composers

(such as John Cage, Morton Feldman) who intermingled within the contemporary scene of the time in New York City. Byers points to 1960s performance artist Allen Kaprow's declaration that "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible." Arguing such attitude developed in part out of Olson's earlier concerns; similar to the searching evident in early work of the painters and composers for a new artistic path away from, as found under modernism, the chiseled art object removed from the living world for appreciative observation.

"For Olson, in other words, modernism had always been too old to begin with, too beholden to the traditions it made new. The 'attack on all vestigia of Western civilization' which he envisioned demanded that modernist art reinvent itself, running against the grain of 'Western civilization' by returning 'man' to his original home in space."

That is, Olson sought to focus attention in his developing poetics where the poems act as one with daily events in the life of the poet:

"In his writings on space between 1946 and 1950, culminating in 'Projective Verse', Olson had consistently reiterated the need to annex the art object with the world itself, something he shared with a diverse body of contemporary American criticism and art practice, from Pollock to Cage to Harold Rosenberg."

While artist Carolee Schneeman found Olson's poetics highly influential "especially his emphasis on the 'phrase as a structure in motion about actual space'" Byers notes that

"more explicitly than his contemporaries, however, Olson framed this movement into 'actual space' as an ethical one. 'In antithesis to time,' he wrote in 1948, 'space' contains 'a humanitas eased out of contemporary narrows.' Art, including poetry, could point to a new and modest postwar ethic by creating work in which the maker was less important than the materials, and in which the world outside the work was no longer excluded from it."

The attention Byers brings to this ethical core at the base of Olson's work echoes the "precarity" Mackey locates in discussing "breath." How prevalently affairs of immediate lived experience enter into the realm of one's artistic practice; that there is no separation.

Byers usefully contrasts Olson's poetry from his final years—when his *Maximus Poems* became ever increasingly shards, bits of scattered notations taken down as it were from daily living—with the "Confessional verse" of Robert Lowell:

"Though firmly centred in the subject of Olson himself, the poem has little in common with the autobiographical genre initiated by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which had simulated artlessness while remaining self-consciously designed. The status of Olson's lines is ambivalent: is this a poem, a diary entry, an aide-memoire, a note to self?"

Olson's *Maximus* is not "a detached object of aesthetic scrutiny. [...] not a self-contained artwork but the precipitate of a life practice; what Olson called, in 1968, 'keeping my attentions [...] clear'."

As Byers observes, "Far from confined to the typewriter, or even to paper, Olson wrote on almost every available surface, with no strict distinction between 'poems' and other kinds of text." This serves as a near direct tie between Olson and Emily Dickinson, whose habitual composing of poems on various scraps of paper have been rather infamously celebrated of late, warranting the sumptuous *Gorgeous Nothings*. Ironically enough, it is poet Susan Howe, a central character in the "shipwreck" of the Buffalo "Poetry War", who drew much of the attention to this element so key to Dickinson's compositional practice.

This evident shift of Olson's towards allowing the world into the work of art also relates him to another artist of the same generation Byers covers, painter Philip Guston. Guston's likewise late work with its crudely painted Klansmen driving around with two-by-fours, and other odds and ends of humanity's detritus piled up about, is not at all a far cry from lines of Olson's *Maximus*, such as the final, or near final, "my wife my car my color and myself". Both Guston and Olson embedded the world into their art not as a mere stance for posturing purposes, but as a vital statement of reality: staking the art on nothing less than life itself. Not seeking any excuse from their own culpability when confronting the messiness of daily affairs.

Faced with the reality of today's news at its most unreal, i.e. the presidential term of a television carnival barker and the blindly faithful masses continuing to cling to his confidence man charade, it is frustrating to see any "breath" wasted in breezy poetical waxing. Poetry is as necessary as ever to cut through the bullshit. Enter Duke University's 50th anniversary edition of Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* "Entrapment is this society's / Sole activity, I whispered / and Only laughter / can blow it to rags...." It was quite unexpected when Duke University first came round in 1989 to reissuing Dorn's spoofy drugged out epic of serious mirth, and this 50th anniversary edition is no less unexpected. Yet it is a very pleasing surprise, including as it does Olson's 1955 "Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn" along with Michael Davidson's 1981 essay "To Eliminate the Draw: Edward Dorn's *Slinger*" as supplementary texts.

Providing Olson's "bibliography" is most percipient. It was the older poet's "gift" to the aspiring student Dorn at Black Mountain College. A bon voyage of sorts from teacher to student as Dorn set off into the world as it were to "make it" as a poet. *Gunslinger* demarcates a clear turn in

Dorn's oeuvre and may thus be seen as representing his breakthrough performance out from under the weight of Olson's clearly extensive influence upon his earlier work. Also amid Olson's bombastic deluge of references there's plenty of inspiring textual wormholes for assiduous students to be squirreled off upon attempting relate them to Dorn's amorphously ambiguous poem's thematic use of motifs from out the broad canvas of the American West.

Inclusion of Davidson's essay on the other hand makes for an odd bit of pairing, at least in terms of his handling of Olson. For Davidson, Olson's poetry is "essentially nostalgic" and he imagines the poet would be "disturbed" by Dorn's poem, however "not by the historical-social critique but rather it's method of presentation." For "*Slinger* is highly ironic, full of puns, jokes, and verbal pratfalls [...] for the literal-minded Olson, such playfulness must have seemed irrelevant to the task at hand." This argument is a bit odd given that the "bibliography" itself shows Olson's own penchant delight for use of jokes and puns. Quite contrary to Davidson's portrayal of him the older poet is quite jocular, "How's the Big Shitty?" and fully aware of his own baggage as the elder: "I imagine you don't have as much shit in you as I do simply that you iz later, Mister/Dorn."

In addition, there's Davidson's apologetic admonition concerning his use of the universalizing "man" to represent "humanity" throughout his essay: "At that time (and perhaps influenced by Olson's own usage) I was more comfortable using the masculine pronoun to refer to the general category of human beings." Tagged onto the very end, appearing just above his footnotes, this is the sole addition Davidson bothers making to his decades old piece of criticism. Davidson's desire to pin possible blame upon Olson, who was a decade deceased by the time and whose own

“usage” would date a further generation back, for what was widely accepted language etiquette is but a thoroughly muck-drenched step-away from Yépez’s cop-out assignation of Olson as the unilateral fall guy for U.S. Imperialist action and desire. It’s absurd.

The accompaniment of a fresh foreword by Marjorie Perloff adds a fair bit of polish to the affair fully situating Dorn’s poem in the despair of our contemporary moment. Looking back at her introduction to the previous edition, Perloff surprisingly notices that at the time she drew a comparison between Donald Trump and the poem’s portrayal of tycoon Howard Hughes. As she remarks, “Trump must have already been part of our collective unconscious.” (No doubt busily paving his fecal littered path to high office.) Perloff continues on, getting even a bit whimsical, “*Mar-a-lago*: what a perfect name for the location—‘enormous space / between here and formerly,’ ‘the vacuum of social infinity’” in which the characters of Dorn’s poem enact their galactic western caravan’s crawl. And she reminds us that “the epic journey of this ‘constellation’ turns out to lead nowhere.” Which appropriately enough sums up where much of the country is currently headed.

The presidential reign of Trump is nothing new. He’s already there in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*. Dorn, following Olson following Melville, called it out long ago: Fuck this country. Its politics. Its people. Charlatanism is the national religion. A disease rotting the society’s core. Perloff references both Afterwords to Dorn’s *Collected Poems* one by Amiri Baraka and the other by J.H. Prynne. Baraka quotes Dorn’s poem “Tribe” and the poet’s bitterness therein is sweetly refreshing. It is worth asking ourselves how not to be on the side of “the terrorists”, “every defiant nation this jerk / Ethnic crazy country bombs.” Who else is there?

Who haven't we bombed? While Prynne reminds that for Dorn the priority behind the work is "to keep the language from falling into the hands of those who want to promote it as an oppressive instrument." And in lines of *Gunslinger* arrives eerie premonition that the past demise and current desuetude of the Olson lectures does not bode well for the fate of future Creeley lectures.

"it is dangerous to be named
and makes you mortal.
If you have a name
you can be sold
you can be told
by that name leave, or come
you become, in short
a reference, or if bad luck
is large in your future
you might become an institution."