

## The Body Is A House

Spoken at “Speaking of Olson” Event under Auspices of Gloucester Writers Center, at Rocky Neck Arts, Gloucester, Ma. November 10, 2018.

“...that I am one/with my skin  
Plus this—plus this: that forever the geography...  
which leans in  
on me ...”

*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27<sup>i</sup>*

At 21, I was dancing in the NYC streets and loft performances and working as store manager with “Willie” (Ammiel) Alcalay at Frank Crowley’s Used Books in Greenwich Village. I had just graduated from the City University during Open Admissions where everyone was going back to school at a cost of \$30 per year. Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, John Ashbery, and many others taught at CUNY during this time. Willie (as I called Ammiel then) and I attended a poetry writing class of Gilbert Sorrentino at the New School. And it was the 70s—garbage, taxi, and rent strikes; blackouts, open prostitution along the Deuce, and residential neighborhoods looking like post-war Europe. At the same time, ALL the doors were open to us: libraries, parks, pubs, jazz clubs, dance halls, museums, movie theaters and poetry readings. Robert Duncan came to our bookstore to hang out after he spoke at the Stuyvesant Church now called The Poetry Project. We went everywhere, and, seemingly belonged everywhere.

During this time, Willie gave me a copy of Charles Olson’s *Proprioception* (1965) (written ten years earlier for Ed Dorn.) So I carried the book around, and read it over and over like a manual. In 2010, thirty-five years later ... I am still hanging out with Willie, who had since returned to his birth-name, Ammiel, as we know him today. I am at Storrs doing research as consulting editor for Alcalay’s superb series, *Lost and Found: CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* and came across a three-page fragment of Charles Olson’s written in 1955. It had no title, but it read like this.

The Body is a house. Inside the body is thing as vast and as difficult to experience as the universe. But has this advantage that it is inside. It can be experienced directly.<sup>1</sup>

I want to say that my sole purpose here tonight is to share with you how I understand this, and how it is that I think Charles Olson was working very hard to bridge a knowledge that had been lost and at the same time, needed to be newly intuited. This is the story of proprioception.

[I pause in my talk to ask the Audience to stand up to practice “The 18 Pearls” — a tactile exercise form of pounding parts of the body in preparation for Tai Chi, Xi Gong, and the martial arts. What I am doing en masse is inviting a roomful of people to rhythmically pressurize the surfaces and joint capsules of the body, which stimulates the body’s proprioceptive responses in space and relationship to gravity. I explain more below...]

## In Search for a Definition

**Proprioception** (pronounced /ˌprɒʊpri.ə'sepʃən/ *PRO-pree-o-SEP-shən*), from Latin *proprius*, meaning "one's own" and perception, is the **sense** of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body. It is the sense that indicates whether the body is moving with required effort, as well as where the various parts of the body are located in relation to each other.

Unlike the **exteroceptive** senses by which we perceive the outside world, and **interoceptive** senses, by which we perceive pain and the movement of internal organs—proprioception is a third distinct sensory system that provides feedback solely on the status of the body—as if the body were a house sited in its place.

Physically, proprioception is experienced viz. pressure through the joints which fires locator messages into the nervous system from joint-end fibrous muscle bundles called “golgi bodies.”

Psychically, proprioception functions as a built-in technique for consciousness i.e. as an anchor to self—I know *where* I am, therefore I am!” But, as a dancer, Charles Olson’s idea of “proprioception” is a theory of knowledge that not only includes the body, but begins with it.

“Dance is an object and an action. It is simultaneously an object and an action. As a medium, it has the tremendous advantage — and limit — of the human body as its object, and that its action bucks that gravity, and can depend on it...the Vedas [to] define man in two ways, “mana” as a thing which thinks, and “nara” as “root,” which in its root means, you tell me, to dance. Man [is]...a thing which simultaneously thinks and dances.”

From Syllabary for a Dancer, to Naharaj

**To give a little history here on the idea of “proprioception” before it was named. I think Charles knew about this stuff!**

In 1794, Johann Christian Reil, anatomist and psychiatrist of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century coined the two complementary terms “gemeingefuhl” or “general sensibility,” and “cenesthesia” which is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as “the vital sense,” or, “the undifferentiated complex of organic sensations by which one is aware of the body and bodily conditions” (1945). Cenesthesia was—according to Reil—one of three that informed the soul. First, was “external sensation” or the perception of the outside world through the senses. Second, was “internal sense” otherwise called “the organ of the soul,” where the abilities of

imagination, judgment, and consciousness were housed. The third was this “vital sense” otherwise named “cenesthesia.”<sup>ii, iii</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, evolutionists incorporated Reil’s third principle, “cenesthesia” by calling it “the primary body sense.”<sup>iv</sup> In spite of the classic dichotomies of external and internal perception or the body-mind split, it was still maintained, that in addition to sensations of placement and orientation that “mental life was also determined by sensory activity.”<sup>v</sup>

As the blurring between self-perception and internal sensing continued, Theodule Ribot wrote in his *Diseases of Personality* (1891) that personality varied as organic (physical) sensations varied. Therefore, the unity of the ego was dependent on both consciousness *and* physiology; the unconscious, as it was then perceived, continued to find its origin in the life of the body.<sup>vi</sup>

In 1906, however, Charles Scott Sherrington published a landmark work that introduced a more physical explanation of *proprioception*, *interoception*, and *exteroception*. The exteroceptors were the organs responsible for information from outside the body such as the eyes, ears, mouth, and skin. The interoceptors gave information about the internal organs, but no longer was there a place for consciousness there; proprioception was the awareness of movement derived from muscular, tendon, and articular sources. Research would continue throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> c. bringing us to Webster Dictionary’s neurological definition.

**[Try this for a minute: take your neighbors hand and arm in both your two hands and gently create pressure centrally into the joint — THIS! Is proprioception. ]**

But this further sophistication in physiology, created a mystery as to where the soul was housed. Well, we’ve got Freud coming in here: ten or so years later with paradigmatic shift of the theory of the unconscious that halted the investigation of body-location as it related to personality and personal history. These new ideas negated that the body would be a direct source or place of psychic suffering. Rather than the total body being the whole house—the house was a head, relegated to the mind’s world of symbols and “custodian of language and the producer of palimpsests or puzzles that were then open to being deciphered.”<sup>vii</sup> I am not saying this wasn’t an important discovery or untrue. What I am saying is that the holistic, somewhat interdisciplinary tenet of “the vital sense” (cenesthesia) was about to be lost. And it was, for a while, as a kind of reductive “movement system” approach ran in tandem with psychoanalysis.

There persisted this interest to find methods for ‘reading’ the body—placement, posture and movement—in relation to the mind. Sandor Ferenczi (1916) and Allport and Vernon (1933) studied human movement styles as a reflection of personality. Wilhelm Reich (1933) made his ‘character analysis’ based on scanning the physical self in musculature, posture, gait,

gesture and breathing. Deutsch, Mahler (1940's), Lowen (1950's) looked at body movement in relation to one's psychology. Warren Lamb's 'posture-gesture-merging' (1965) was a technique for observing movement style and integration with emotional states. And in the 1970's, Judith Kestenberg was using Laban Movement Analysis with a psychoanalytic grid to examine early childhood. The developmental movement theorists viewed the human infant as a "growing action system" whose specifically sequenced movements led to the infant's ability to function in the world both cognitively and spatially. Later, Piaget's views put forth that the foundations of intelligence were unconditionally supported by the type and manner of a child's motor development. However, in spite of all this psycho-physical pioneering, something had been lost—it was a *place* that had been lost; a place where the universe could go. This is the great finale in Olson's poem ~

The universe flowing in  
Inside

In 1973, my teacher, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen was given the name of her work by her teacher in Japan, he told her to call it: *Body-Mind Centering*.<sup>viii</sup> She came up with a response to the deeper significance of proprioception by introducing a deeper knowledge of the body by training one's awareness of the body through exploration. Its serious inquiry that seeks to capture the humanistic, if not philosophical, impulse towards a sensory life—the desire for growth, the placement of self, and the drive to connect.

Bainbridge Cohen was interested in creating pedagogy of the real body that demanded an interdisciplinary approach to body/mind—now, we call it Somatics or the study of the living body. And, it's deeply experiential. It is here, in the 70s that you begin to see the return of an understanding of "cenesthesia" and a re-grafting of the way to frame whole human being. It makes me think of Olson's "composition by field," really.

But all of this was in the air in 1950 with Olson's "Projective Verse," which focused on "certain laws and possibilities of the breath..." and lungs and ribs and body... Olson's "composition by field" opposed traditional poetic methods by seeking the challenge of the transferring of, what he called "poetic energy" to the poem itself and back to the reader. He talked about the "kinetics of the thing" — which as another challenge, I took this quote and interceded the word "dance," and it works! I quote:

A poem is energy/A dance is energy...  
From the moment the poet ventures into field composition puts himself in the open field...  
From the moment the dancer ventures into the field of composition puts him/her into the space...  
[paraphrased from "Projective Verse," 1950.]

We haven't yet talked about Space. But space will always bring us back to proprioception, as proprioception can only happen *in* space. I believe had Bainbridge Cohen and Olson met in

the 70s, they would have created a new definition for proprioception by reconnecting it back to “The Vital Sense” and I quote

To which  
PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensibility...<sup>ix</sup>

More of Olson’s words:

... the body of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, ‘depth’ viz. SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.<sup>x</sup>

In 1986, I wrote this down when I heard it...

Speak in the room, as if you have your hand on someone’s knee—in layers—on the clothes, to skin, tissue, to bone....

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

What propels us is a fundamental desire to move and also a fundamental desire to know. What we think and perceive is tied up with the history of our body’s movement-sense (sensation) and our body’s body-feeling (cenesthesia). Therefore, the proprioceptive purpose of movement is, like psychoanalysis, a hermeneutic—it carries a message along the path of interpretation. *To move is to know thyself*. It helps to know this, and especially, in this time we live in, when we are out of words!!! Listen to this!

In a note from 1965 (in “*Place; & Names*”) Olson writes:

you can’t use words as ideas anymore than that they can be strung as sounds. They are meaning only and actions of their own sort.

feeling and desires and breath  
the cause of the words coming into existence  
ahead of them, the nose bring them out ahead of its—  
self, and a principle, their own meaning.

The acquisition of this broad knowing in Olson’s words and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s “experiencing,” is housed in what that 18<sup>th</sup> c. Dr. Reil would identify as the cenesthetic domain, whose mission is to *build the house*, with all its contents and in its place.

---

<sup>i</sup> Olson, Charles, *The Maximus Poems* (Ed. George Butterick. Berkeley:University of California Press, 1983).

---

<sup>i</sup> Olson, Charles. "The Body is a House." Unfinished, unpublished text - 1955. Storrs Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>ii</sup> Starobinski, Jean, "The Natural and Literary History of Bodily Sensation," in *Fragments for the History of the Human Body, Part Two* (Edited by Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi. (New York, N.Y.: Zone, 1989, p. 355).

<sup>iii</sup> *The Modern Home Physician, A New Encyclopedia of Medical Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.: WM. H. Wise & Company, p. 92).

<sup>iv</sup> Starobinski, op.cit., 355.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>viii</sup> Cohen, Bonnie Bainbridge, *Sensing, Feeling and Action* (Northampton, Ma.: Contact Quarterly Editions, 1989).

<sup>ix</sup> Olson, Charles, *Proprioception* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1965, p. 3).

<sup>x</sup> Olson, Op. Cit., 4.