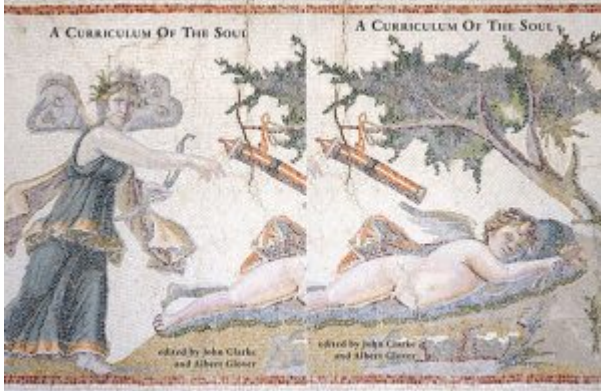


[A Curriculum Of The Soul](#)

written by Patrick James Dunagan | June 5, 2017



A Curriculum Of The Soul, Volume One and Two
edited by John Clarke and Albert Glover
Spuyten Duyvil, Roots & Branches Series, 2016
456 pages, 440 pages – [Amazon](#) / [Spuyten Duyvil](#)

In memory of Joanne Elizabeth Kyger, November 19, 1934 – March 22, 2017, one of the greats.

After becoming enamored with the work of poet Charles Olson sometime in the mid-1990s, I began occasionally coming across a series of chapbook-sized pamphlets that all had Olson's letter/poem/manifesto "A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul" emblazoned across the insides of the front and back cover. Each of these fascicles (as I would later learn was the favored term for referring to them) was numbered (0-28) with a separate title (*Matter*, *Homer's Art*, *Dance*, *Mind*, et al) and individual author (Alice Notley, Lewis MacAdams, Michael Boughn, John Thorpe, et al) I only sometimes recognized the name of. On the back cover the publisher was identified as "the institute for further studies" with an address in Canton, NY. More often than not, it was noted that the odd bit of abstract cover art was by the mysterious-seeming artist Guy Berard and usually the subtitle "a curriculum of the soul" appeared on the cover and/or inside title page.

While I gleaned that these slim yet hefty works rather obviously had some connection to Olson, the exact nature of that connection was not clear, although obviously it had something to do with this fascinating document of his, "A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul." In a blog post for the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* poet Joanne Kyger describes this text of Olson's as "a distinctive map with 223 names, subjects, ideas, topics, strewn across the page at all angles." Olson directs the reader in every imaginable direction, covering a wide-ranging, diverse amount of territory from the arts to the historical/religious without any attempt to offer clear guidance as to where

one's reading of the text itself or any of its myriad subject areas might begin or end.

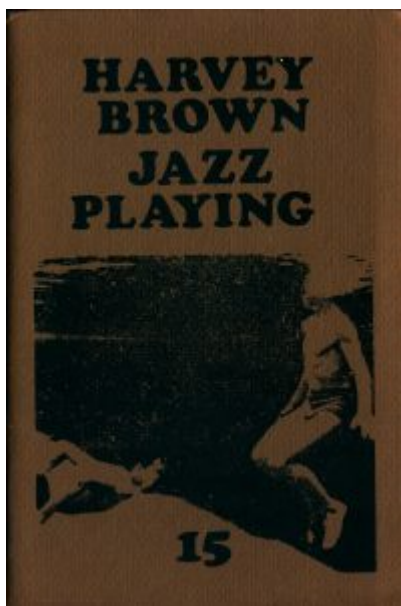
It was only during the next several years as I read ever further into the massive pilings of Olson-related scholarship, historical sketches and biographical accounts concerning his late-in-life affiliation as a faculty member in the English department with the State University at Buffalo during the late 1960s that I started to uncover various pieces of the full story. And only is it now with the sumptuous two-volume paperback edition of the complete *Curriculum of the Soul* (after the original publication in an ultra-deluxe \$3,000—quite outside of my purchase range—limited fine press edition in 2010) have I finally been able for the first time to read the collected set of fascicles as a whole.

In 1963 Olson was brought to the newly founded State University of New York at Buffalo by the fresh-to-the-job young English Department Chair Albert Cook. By that time, the buzz surrounding Olson's reign over the final years of Black Mountain College in North Carolina during the early 1950s had already reached mythic proportions. The tales have long since continued circulate of his all-night classes amid the rich exchange between the numerous poets and artists making up both the faculty and student body. Young artists and writers who were present during these years at what was arguably the premiere mid-20th century experimental arts college in the States range from artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg to poets such as Ed Dorn and John Wieners. In tapping Olson for Buffalo, Cook was hoping to unleash a similar kinetic burst of creative energy among students and faculty alike. As he had hoped, Olson's time in Buffalo, brief as it was, eventually came to be seen, particularly among some participants, to arguably rival Black Mountain as a period of unrivaled fertility in North American poetry.

Those who attended Olson's Buffalo sessions have passed on many tales of encountering him in the classroom. Some forty years after the fact, in an interview with the *Chicago Review*, poet Stephen Rodefer evocatively recalled his own memorable first impressions:

On the way to the first class, in Cook basement I remember, I ducked in to use the men's room, and there was a guy at the other end of a row of sinks having a Marine bath, shirt off, suspenders hanging from the waistband at both sides, just going at it with a bar of soap. Five minutes later, sitting in the seminar room, we all looked up and a big clean guy in a water-stained shirt walked in, sat at the desk, unpacked a Wollensack, put on a tape and hit the button. Well, for the next half hour, perhaps longer, we were treated to, more like deluged by, a complex harangue having to do with archaeology, the Sumerians, someone named Havelock, Frobenius, or Merleau-Ponty, the pre-Socratics, the whole question of Enkidu, and all other manner of esoteric reference. I was twenty-two, it was all Greek to me, and I rather thought as well it surely had to be to the other students. Then he punched off the tape and carried on in the same voice much the same confounding discourse.

During the same period as Rodefer, poet and now professor emeritus at St. Lawrence University Albert Glover was also a student in Buffalo. It was at this time he became “acquainted” with Blake scholar, poet, and jazz musician John “Jack” Clarke. Clarke had freshly finished his doctorate when fellow Ohioan Cook tapped him to join the English department faculty at Buffalo. Inspired by Olson’s teaching and the ferment of the scene surrounding him, Glover along with his fellow then-students the venerated Vancouver poet Fred Wah and future Olson scholar/poet/librarian George Butterick founded The Institute for Further Studies. Under the influential guiding hand of Clarke, they executed an ambitious pursuit of Olson-related publishing activities and events over the years with the significant financial funding of another student, the poet, and heir to a small financial fortune, Harvey Brown. *The Curriculum of the Soul* represents the ultimate, final summation of the Institute’s activity.



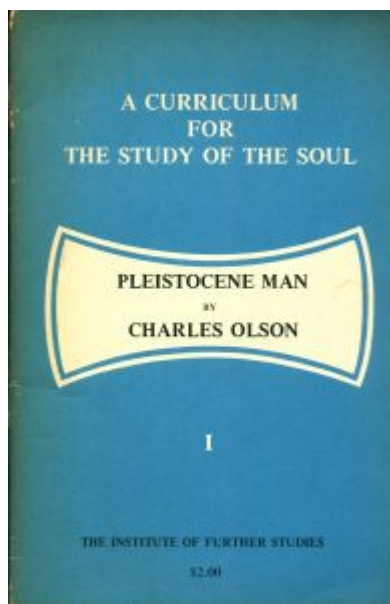
Friendship based upon a shared devotion to undertaking the pursuit of knowledge via poetry lay at the heart of the Institute and its endeavors. Recognition between members of the group wasn’t confined to activities of the classroom or the printed page. Superficial divisions between student and teacher were brushed aside. Clarke, for instance, took Olson’s class as a student in 1964 while himself a faculty member. Once when recalling his first meeting with Olson while at a party off campus Clarke noted: “Olson’s report of the meeting, as someone later told me, was that he dug my pants, the material they were made of, and the way I was sitting with my legs crossed.” There was recognition of each other’s sympathetic care for a certain personal style of presentation. An appreciation for each other’s sense of style—what might be understood in a sense as being “hip”—brought together the interests and work of all these poets.

Olson’s “A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul” first appeared in the Institute’s flagship publication *The Magazine of Further Studies* issue #5 in 1968. That same year, the institute also published Olson’s *Pleistocene Man* making certain, as Glover notes, “its format imitated the Cambridge Ancient History fascicles Olson used for some of his research.” This 20-page volume presents a series of letters Olson wrote to Clarke in the fall of 1965 after

leaving Buffalo for personal reasons and handing his class on "Myth" in the Pleistocene era over to Clarke. After Olson's death in 1970, Glover envisioned a "collaborative epic" testimonial to Olson. He discussed the prospect for such a project with Clarke, who then went through "A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul," identifying 28 topics, for each of which he envisioned assigning a poet to complete an individual body of work. *Pleistocene Man* became a natural fit as #0 of this projected collaborative project. Each fascicle of which would mirror *Pleistocene Man* in overall design and size.

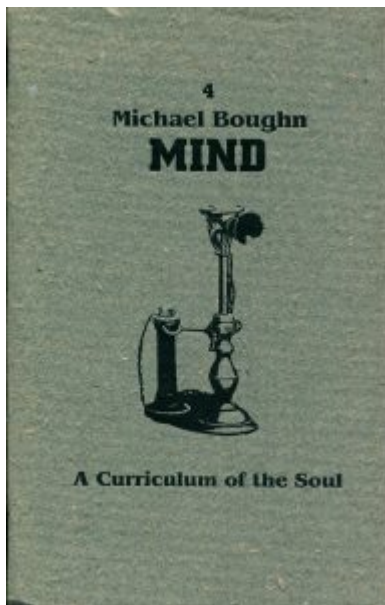
In Glover's words, Clarke "procured a manuscript for each fascicle" while Glover himself oversaw "some way to print and distribute" them through the years. As *Curriculum* contributor Kyger (*Phenomenological*) succinctly sums the project up:

After Charles Olson died in January 1970, his colleague, Jack Clarke, made a selection of 28 of these words, assigning them to members of the Olson Community. The idea was to write a short chapbook or "fascicle" of 25-50 pages on the subject. Some of the assignments were finished quickly and published from 1972-1974. Other topics were reassigned. The final fascicle was published in 2002.



Due to a variety of factors, topics were assigned and re-assigned. The resulting sequence of individual publication was suitably haphazard in appearance. The final ordering of the full *Curriculum* with accompanying initial date of publication goes: (0) *Pleistocene Man* / Charles Olson, 1968, (1) *The Mushroom* / Albert Glover, 1972, (2) *Dream* / Duncan McNaughton, 1973, (3) *Woman* / John Wieners, 1972, (4) *Mind* / Michael Boughn, 1999, (5) *one's own Language* / Lisa Jarnot, 2002, (6) *Earth* / Fred Wah, 1974, (7) *Blake* / John Clarke, 1973, (8) *Dante* / Robert Duncan, 1974, (9) *Homer's Art* / Alice Notley, 1990, (10) *Bach's Belief* / Robin Blaser, 1995, (11) *Novalis' Subjects* / Robert Dalke, trans., 1973, (12) *The Norse* / George F. Butterick, 1973,

(13) The Arabs / Edward Kissam, 1972, (14) American Indians / Edgar Billowitz, 1972, (15) Jazz Playing / Harvey Brown, 1977, (16) Dance / Lewis MacAdams, Jr., 1972, (17) Egyptians Hieroglyphs / E. Sanders, 1973, (18) Ismaeli Muslimism / M. Bylebyl, 1972, (19) Alchemy / David Tirrell, 1972, (20) Perspective / Daniel Zimmerman, 1974, (21) Vision / Drummond Hadley, 1972, (22) Messages / James Koller, 1972, (23) Analytic Psychology / G. Lansing, 1983, (24) Phenomenological / Joanne Kyger, 1989, (25) Matter / John Thorpe, 1975, (26) Attention / Robert Grenier, 1985, (27) Sensation / Anselm Hollo, 1972, (28) Organism / Michael McClure, 1974. (This listing with some slight adjustments is borrowed from the MA thesis of Timothy James Cook.)



In correspondence with fellow *Curriculum* contributor Michael Boughn (*Mind*), who was also Clarke's assistant for a number of years in 1980s, Glover (*The Mushroom*) further describes his conception of the *Curriculum* as "collaborative epic" and how the

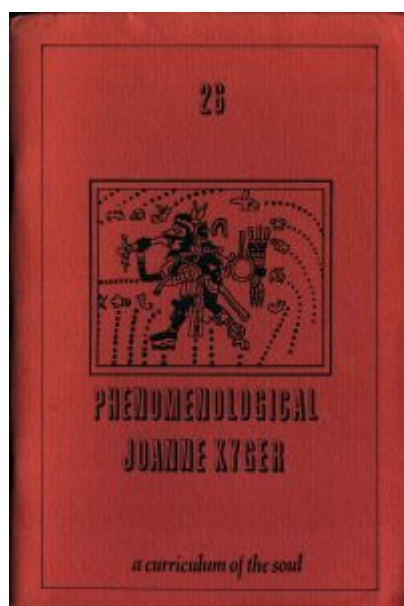
Original 'vision' was of a large book written by 'Olson'—and I would still, someday, hope to publish it as such. It is that sense of "Homer" and would make only the second one (this one, of course, somewhat different in its concept of 'history' and 'narrative') in 'the tradition.' You see it in 'The Mushroom' ('as if we were all one voice / of various sounds'— since revised: 'we are all one voice / of various sounds').

The full *Curriculum* as now published yields to Glover's original conception in so far that there are no names attached to the individual topics. Each fascicle simply appears separated by its title page without author identification as if written in one voice by one author. Only in the very back of the volumes are individual contributors acknowledged in small print. Thus this "collaborative epic" truly has the appearance to the uninitiated eye as being as mysterious and strange a spectacle as I first found the individual fascicles to be.

The project was incomplete at the time of Clarke's death in 1992 and Glover

was forced to continue and complete the project on his own. There have been a total five necessary reassignments over the years, one of them, Lisa Jarnot's *one's own language* was the final fascicle appearing in 2002. Kyger's was another of the reassignments. In her own words:

In 1985 I was assigned topic #26 PHENOMENOLOGICAL, originally given to Robert Hogg. I used my journal from a trip to the Yucatan for much of the content of the fascicle. I carried along Olson's Mayan Letters written during his 6 month stay in Campeche in 1951. It acted as a kind of counterweight from three decades earlier for what was happening at the moment. Information was just being discovered about the history of the mysterious Mayan and their deserted temples. 'I guess these people had a very ancient way of NOT IMPROVING on nature... and with an attention that did not include 'improvement''. A 'phenomenological realism which strums the strings of time without touching them,' says Olson.



Kyger closes with the reflection: "This curriculum of study is as far reaching as boundaries want to go. And as particular or general as any voice wants to be—and all together create an organism that projects the activity of the 'soul,' a community of minds." What began as relatively small gathering of a half-dozen or so young aspiring student and faculty poets on a remote university campus grew to ultimately encompass a broad reach across generations of North American poets. The full *Curriculum* published as a whole distills into two volumes the cumulative poetic knowledge this particular "community" has arrived at individually over a period of several decades.

Not surprisingly, given the high number of contributing authors, there is no overarching argument or theoretical battle being waged throughout the collected "book." As Boughn points out when commenting upon his correspondence with Glover:

Whether it is truly an epic is in a sense beside the point. Perhaps

more important is its conscious invocation of a specific notion of community. The community revealed here in relation to Olson's provocation and the call and response of the participants is anything but uniform, anything then but a communion with and within, say, a "theory," the unobstructed visibility of what John Clarke called the MONO. It is rather a register of the immensity and incommensurability of the relations of authoritative finitudes circulating within and beyond the space of the thought Olson's work provokes.

Indeed, what each fascicle picks up from Olson and carries forward in its own unique, yet shared fashion is what poet Joe Safdie identifies in a recent lecture on Olson at the Gloucester Writers' Center as Olson's sense of "the local AS the cosmos." Safdie expands upon what this means for him as made evident in lines from Olson's *Maximus Poems*:

We don't exist until we act: it's the kinesis of the thing. 'that no event // is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal / event' ('A Later Note on Letter #15'). Or, rather, the local contains the eternal: 'finding one's place' is a constant action, a means of travel without necessarily going anywhere, because 'one's place' is always being invented, and might be another's as well, plus the space between. Just find a place to make your stand, and take it easy. This is eternity: this now.

It is in fact the individuality of each fascicle that ties them all together. Olson declared, "Limits are what any of us are inside of." And within *The Curriculum of the Soul* is laid out a set of explorations regarding various "limits" in which anyone may find herself. Each author's approach varies from that of the others as each tackles their individual topic from within their own set of circumstances. It is a guidebook. A set of imaginative responses to the world grounded in the activity of a particular gathering of individual authors from across decades of time.

Clarke once wrote to Glover, "I, personally, enjoy the ultimate freedom of being unknown" celebrating his own anonymity. To this day, Clarke (not to be confused with the British poet John Clarke) remains a virtually unheard of figure. Unfortunately this has come to apply as well to *The Curriculum of the Soul*, enveloping the project in an air of unfamiliarity throughout most of the poetry world. In addition, it is of no help that there's been a lurking criticism of the Institute of Further Studies and the *Curriculum* project from the beginning of its activity. The founding individuals have long been adversely labeled by terms such as "Olsonites" and experienced the distaste of poet peers as well as those they would welcome as their poet precursors.

The poets Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley, whose connections with Olson form a vital part of the Black Mountain mythos, were two of the originally proposed authors Clarke intended to have write fascicles who eventually backed out. They found the project an uncomfortable proposal. Unwilling to have for all

appearances their work associated to Olson's in any derivative way, especially under employment of any quasi-spiritual seeming terms such as "Soul." They adamantly refused to have their work mixed up with that of any sort of discipleship groupies. This was in spite of the fact that poets of similarly equal stature, e.g. Robert Duncan, John Wieners, and Michael McClure, readily stepped forward when called upon by Clarke.

In his essay "Olson's Buffalo," Boughn summarizes the criticism of the Institute and its endeavors such as the *Curriculum*:

The critics of the community Olson engendered in Buffalo have from the beginning proposed its defining relation as one of dominance and submission, with Olson positioned as what's been called the "High Priest." Typically, those around him then become identified as "disciples," "acolytes," or some other usually religious term meant to signify a loss of "autonomy" or "individual authority".

He then offers his own rejection of the grounds from which such judgment is derived:

"Within such a community as I'm attempting to define here, however, such traditional vocabularies (mostly directly derived from Enlightenment polemics against the ancien régime) having to do with static hierarchical relations of power-equality, autonomy, derivative, original, subservient-as well as the accompanying package of anti-religious/pro-Reason pejorative labels like cult, church, disciple, etc., are drained of meaning and become inoperative, along with the cosmology that generates them."

For the argument of Boughn's rebuttal to have any appeal to readers, everything hinges in large part upon how readers approach understanding words like "Soul" and whether they're comfortable defining their approach to reading any work as having a "cosmology" behind it. Few readers will likely find either the defense or the criticism of particular interest. In the current day, even among poets and artists, there is a broad lack of sympathy with any concern over such affairs.

Many readers may feel the Institute's endeavors and the *Curriculum* are products of an "in crowd" of the devoted. Yet the *Curriculum* does offer far more than that. It's difficult to understand how any reader would look at the completed whole with a dismissive attitude. The approaches taken by authors and the subjects covered within each fascicle are so widely divergent, embracing competing shifts of style and attendant world views from fascicle-to-fascicle that surely there's something for everyone to engage with. There are diaries/journals, ecstatic visions, poems, letters, translations, occult sermons, critical engagements, diatribes and incendiary evocations. The texts are by men and women, the gay and the straight. Throughout the work, there is an abiding certainty that none of these individual works were tampered with, silenced, denounced, or otherwise watered down. Each contributor had free

reign to approach their subject as they saw fit. The result is the greatest grab bag of poet-wisdom out there. Take it or leave it, *The Curriculum of the Soul* remains a poetic text unlike any other of its time.