

## From Ammiel Alcalay A Little History

Perhaps Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech is very like a poem. The epigraph to this introduction, Du Bois's "Postscript" to the *The Gift of Black* (1924), may indeed be a prose poem. And some musical incursions (blues and jazz) may be admissible, in certain instances, to a kind of racy exotic privilege, but the degree and purpose must be questioned. The most incisive comment, however, remains Charles Olson's "Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it's thar?"

**Joanne Kyger:** In 1957, when I was first coming of "age" in poetry, I was given a copy of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," published in *Poetry New York*. I had questions about how to structure my words on the page. "Projective Verse" became my constant meditative text from then on, finding comfort in its dense, muscular, conversational rhetoric. It was my introduction to the actual breathing of a human voice. I then found a way to notate my own voice in the clarity of the field of the page, "right there where the line is born." Writing became an actuality, a physical body, a real ear, heart, hand, pen, real syllables made into real words, directly, instantly, with no hesitation energy is put onto the force field of the paper page. From Charles Olson I also found a poetics which contained history as memory of time and history as memory of place. Growing up in the U.S. with western history being taught as the history of the Greek/Roman empire, I welcomed Olson's expanded sense of the world, especially that of the American continent which he understood did not stop at the U.S. border. It included the Mayan empire which, as informal archaeologist, he personally experienced, and the civilizations of the rest of Mexico which are often, unaccountably, not included in our western cultural inheritance.

**Diane di Prima:** In terms of direct influence, though, I'd say that Robert Duncan and Charles Olson were it, and are still.

[In Olson]

### 1) the body is proposed as the ground

As heart-beat and breath are the counterpoint in us  
we lay listening to in the dark, as children  
"What if it stops?"

this body stuff—it is the first time it is so patently  
there—

[And]

### 2) that the work proceeds by its own laws:

"he can go by no other track than the one the poem  
under hand declares for itself" opens the door to  
various speculations and notions of the "dictated"  
poem. And Duncan's concept of "obedience" to the  
poem, if it does not grow out of Charles's sentence,  
proceeds from a like base.

staying in the poem (the experience)  
not "memory of"  
not "emotion recollected in tranquility" etc.

This is no easy indulgence, *for the poem is*  
*not all-inclusive*

it "includes" only what is itself

&

is thus particular

Pound, and others, all the way back to Wyatt  
may well have experienced this "obedience"

this following where the poem leads  
but Olson was the first to propose it as a

### LAW OF POETIC COMPOSITION

Charles Olson talks of the “conventions logic had forced  
on syntax” and there are also the ones syntax has forced  
on thought

As is obvious by now, we are the inheritors of a syntax  
formed by logics other than our own:

In composition by field, nothing is excluded *a priori*  
our materials are determined by the particularity of the event  
(the poem itself)

& herein lies the challenge, or one of them—  
to adhere to  
this singularity (uniqueness)  
w/out allowing the attention  
to wander, to be pulled off, distracted  
by the Guardians of the Threshold

those keepers of the New (our self-initiation  
which every poem is)  
the darkness of our self-initiation

as there are postures of attention (readiness)  
unique to each of us

**Susan Howe:** It would be hard to think of poetry apart from  
history. This is one reason Olson has been so important to me.

**Rosmarie Waldrop:** though I would not place the act, the cen-

ter of the energy totally “within,” but on the intersection—  
and interaction—of within and without, of I and world  
(Olson’s “skin”), of libido and language.

Some are more concerned with *the mot just*, with *the*  
perfect metaphor, others, with what “happens between” the  
words (Charles Olson)

...finally, that the vertical tendency of metaphor (Olson:  
“the suck of symbol”) is our hotline to transcendence, to  
divine meaning, hence the poet as priest and prophet.

...What matters is not so much the “thing,” not “the  
right word,” but what “happens...between” (Olson).

**Eileen Myles:** I was walking around this year thinking, I’m  
like Charles Olson, because I feel as if I’ve just used the in-  
side of my apartment, the street, the neighborhood again  
and again and again.

**Kathy Acker:** WROTE DOWN “PRAY FOR US THE  
DEAD,” THE FIRST LINE IN THE FIRST POEM BY  
CHARLES OLSON SHE HAD EVER READ WHEN SHE  
WAS A TEEN-AGER. ALL THE DOLLS WERE DEAD.  
DEAD HAIR. WHEN SHE LOOKED UP THIS POEM, ITS  
FIRST LINE WAS, “WHAT DOES NOT CHANGE / IS THE  
WILL TO CHANGE.”

WENT TO A NEARBY CEMETERY AND WITH  
STICK DOWN IN SAND WROTE THE WORDS “PRAY  
FOR US THE DEAD.” THOUGHT, WHO IS DEAD? THE  
DEAD TREES? WHO IS DEAD? WE LIVE IN SERVICE OF  
THE SPIRIT. MADE MASS WITH TREES DEAD AND  
DIRT AND UNDERNEATH HUMANS AS DEAD OR LIV-  
ING AS ANY STONE OR WOOD.

...When I first started writing, I was influenced by poetry, mainly the Black Mountain school of poetry.

**Peter Wollen:** Acker's debt to Black Mountain—to Charles Olson, in particular, whose work she had known since she was still a schoolgirl—is quite clear and it is strange that this should have gone unrecognized, at least as she saw it, because she was not considered to be a poet. She adapted his concern with writing as language-driven, with a certain kind of incantatory text, based on the physical cadence of the breath, while introducing these preoccupations into the writing of prose rather than poetry.

**Diane Wakoski:** I don't feel I'm doing anything different from what Charles Olson is doing, which is trying to discover the geography of America, which is the geography of the world, which is what human civilization is all about, and which is what my life as a poet is all about.

Olson's concerns were with archaeology, history, and language as it changes through history, so when he uses his city of Gloucester, Massachusetts, as a focus for these interests, open-ended lines which seem digressive become essential; and discovering that each subject led rapidly to another and left a field of discourse, a field of information to roam around in, his lines found themselves unhappy with simple objects and predicates. Olson found that history doesn't have beginnings, middles, and ends, as the neat composer's mind would like to think. So each poem becomes a field, a landscape of ideas, and completely baffles the critic or reader whose reading techniques were formed by the New Criticism.

I try to get away from the whole biological argument

that men are that way and women are that way, but simply that's what our civilization has been. And it's an enormous fight. I was fascinated and delighted last week when a critic, a man named Sherman Paul—who is quite a traditional New England critic, an expert on Emerson and Hart Crane who is currently very, very, very interested in open-field poetry and is in fact working on a book about Charles Olson—came to deliver a lecture on Olson, and gave both a brilliant lecture on Olson's mythology and a very interesting seminar on Olson's coming out of the New England tradition. And it was impressive to listen to him talk about the need for an open-field criticism that can in some way deal with open-field poetry. And we were all interested in a kind of minor little baby intellectual problem, which is why so much of the very masculine open field poetry like Olson's or Creeley's or Duncan's is spurned by the new critics because certainly it seems to be in the tradition of the masculine and the abstract. The real answer is (Paul spent about half an hour talking about the subject) how personal the ideology and aesthetic of the open-field poets are. That they absolutely insist their poems are personal documents. They are *not* abstract documents. That ultimately it is not Maximus speaking; it is *Olson* speaking. And by the end of the Maximus poems he is *declaring* himself to be Olson; no longer—I mean, Maximus never really started as a persona. He started as another name for Olson, but even by the end of the Maximus poems he is not... the name Maximus isn't important; it is Olson and the insistence that it is Olson and Olson's history, which if he has a big enough mind is big enough to encompass the whole of civilization. That is, if you will, moving the feminine notion of the personal in on the masculine notion of



the abstract. And of course we want to think of the androgynous—not in any biological sense meaning having both physical organs, which must be really freakish rather than real, but as a spiritual combining of things—certainly that is moving towards what enlightenment must really be so that you can have the soundness of the abstract principles of the world informed by the urgent sense of the personal. And so far, there isn't a criticism. Even structuralist criticism has moved in the direction of the antipersonal. And yet the whole purpose of structuralist criticism was to deal with the eccentricities and the personalities of twentieth-century freedom and writing that comes after Freud and Marx, in a period of time where people feel absolutely authentic enough to declare themselves personal and at the same time voices, and where we don't have to think of ourselves as spokesmen for groups of people, but in fact proclaim that the personal voice is big enough to be an important voice. And in a sense this is what contemporary poetry is all about, a strange combination of the lyric and the narrative—which is the narrative for heroic epic verse, and the lyric for personal love poem; putting them together and saying that the personal voice of the love poem can be an epic voice. In other words, it can have a narrative content. It can be meaningful in terms of philosophy, history, and civilization. We don't... and I'm not claiming this for myself; I'm claiming this for all serious contemporary poetry, and I'm still angry at the critics who can't see that this is going on and who try very hard to separate out, as they say, the sheets from the ghosts, the strong intellectual (therefore reputable) poets and the weak, namby-pamby personal poets. And I do think that the whole women's movement has done a lot to emphasize the very *worst* elements of this with women claiming, "We feel. You don't feel."

Well, I mean, it's no better to feel if you don't think than to think if you don't feel.

**Anne Waldman:** I date my confirmation of a life in poetry to the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965 and the point where Charles Olson says:

*No, I wanna talk, I mean, you want to listen to a poet? You know, a poet, when he's alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems is the same thing. Dig that! And when he is made of three parts—his life, his mouth, and his poem—then, by god, the earth belongs to us! And what I think has happened is that that's—wow, gee, one doesn't like to claim things, but god, isn't it exciting? I mean, I feel like a kid, I'm in the presence of an event, which I don't believe myself.*

*In the presence of an event* was the illuminating phrase for me. His reading was fragmented, disturbed, and chaotic on one level, but completely lucid on another. He kept the audience there for more than four hours.

Olson continues to be a kind of "imago," as do Robert Duncan, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs, all for very different reasons. But that oral moment in Berkeley where Olson played the fool, the anti-hero poet at his shamanic worst, or most vulnerable on some level—that presence was like a strange attractor as I, as a young person, witnessed it. And the event still ripples in my poetic consciousness. And there's the event of *Maximus*, rich with history and mythology and language and location as a salvation for the poet, his only anchor or link to reality, as we know from the biography and various accounts. He was really possessed with this poem, people would visit him and he would

be surrounded with little scraps of paper and speaking the poem, living the poem. I can identify with that kind of possession and salvation. Poets of my generation and much younger have the conversation about whether it's possible to ever have these kinds of heroic poetic figures again. It's a dying patriarchal breed, perhaps. Whether it's Spicer or Olson or Duncan or Ginsberg or Ed Dorn. Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Ashbery, Baraka, of course, are still active, alive, and are major poetic pioneers. But the imposing, ego-maniacal, fierce, ethical poetry hero whose presence is as startling as the work—where has he gone? And can't there be women heroes? Maybe all the contemporary careerism gets in the way. And maybe the power has shifted to women who have a different, though often as uncompromising, kind of command. We'll see.

**Daphne Marlatt:** That etymology paper really led me into all the writing I would subsequently do... it opened up language for me.

**Fred Wah:** The problem has to do, in Marlatt's case, with where her language comes from. She strives for a writing which will accurately reflect the condition of the writer at the moment of the writing. This is called "proprioceptive" writing and Marlatt is one of its most disciplined proponents.

Proprioception is a physiological term and has to do with the sensory reception in our bodies responding to stimuli arising from within. The term is also the title of a short "chart" written by Charles Olson, circa 1959, in which Olson seeks to place "consciousness," a very important condition for Marlatt. Olson says the gain for proprioception is:

*that movement or action  
is 'home.' Neither of the Unconscious nor  
Projection  
(here used to remove the false opposition of  
'Conscious'; 'consciousness' is self) have a home  
unless the DEPTH implicit is physical being—  
built in space-time specifics, and moving (by  
movement of 'its own'—is asserted, or found-  
out as such. Thus the advantage of the value  
'proprioception.' As such.*

The "soul" is in the "body." George Bowering's outstanding interview with Daphne Marlatt... is called "Given This Body." Repeatedly in the interview and elsewhere, Marlatt has insisted on the place of the body in the origins and processes of her writing. When I talked with her recently she said, "I realize things about my living when I'm writing that I think it's necessary for me to realize and I don't seem to be able to realize them any other way."

**Kathleen Fraser:** ...the *visualized* topos of interior speech and thought—that full or fully empty arena of the page imagined into being by a significant number of non-traditional women poets now publishing—cannot really be adequately thought about without acknowledging the immense, permission-giving moment of Charles Olson's "PROJECTIVE VERSE" manifesto (widely circulated from 1960 onwards, through its paperback arrival in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*). There is no doubt that—even if arrived at through a subtle mix of osmosis and affinity rather than a direct reading of Olson's manifesto—poets entering literature after 1960 gained access to

a more expansive page through Olson's own visual enactment of "field poetics," as mapped out in his major exploratory work, *The Maximus Poems*.

An urgency towards naming, bringing voice to off-the-record thought and experience—as marked by increasing eccentricities of syntax, cadence, diction and tone—would have lacked such a clear concept of PAGE as canvas or screen on which to project flux, without the major invitation Olson provided... this, in spite of his territorial inclusive/exclusive boy-talk. The excitement Olson generated, the event of the *making*—the hands-on construction of a poem being searched out, breathed into and lifted through the page, fragment by fragment, from the archeological layers of each individual's peculiar life—revealed the complex grid of the maker's physical and mental activity. Its "*it*." "Olson's *acute visual sensitivity* separates *The Maximus Poems* from *The Cantos* and *Paterson*..." (Susan Howe)—two other models for poets writing in the 1960s, who desired to break from a more standardized poem model. Olson's idea of high energy "projection" engaged an alchemy of colliding sounds and visual constructions, valuing *irregularity*, counterpoint, adjacency, ambiguity... the movement of poetic language as investigative tool. An open field, not a closed case.

It was Olson's declared move away from the narcissistically probing, psychological defining of self—so seductively explored by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell in the early and mid-1960s, and by their avid followers for at least a generation after—that provided a major alternative ethic of writing for women poets. While seriously committed to gender consciousness, a number of us carried an increasing scepticism towards any fixed rhetoric of the poem, implied or intoned. We resisted the prescription of

authorship as an exclusively unitary proposition—the essential "I" positioned as central to the depiction of reflectivity. As antidote to a mainstream poetics that enthusiastically embraced those first dramatic "confessional" poems, Olson (in "PROJECTIVE VERSE") had already proposed:

*The getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature...*

The excitement and insistence of Olson's spatial, historical, and ethical margins, while clearly speaking from male imperatives, nevertheless helped to stake out an area whose initial usefulness to the poem began to be inventively explored by American women—in some cases drastically reconceived, beginning with work in the 1960s and 1970s by such poets as Barbara Guest, Susan Howe, and Hannah Weiner and continuing forward to very recent poetry by women just beginning to publish.

**Kristin Prevallet:** Instead of buying gas masks and digging underground shelters (or moving to Canada), I turn my rage and confusion towards poetry, the unacknowledged legislation of worlds unacknowledged, to reveal both systems of knowing (content) and structures of ideology (form). Poetry, the work of radical linguistic, contextual, and metrical articulation, is a way to structure my sometimes perpendicular thought processes, transforming confusion and anger into form and meaning. Luckily, there are numerous trajectories in the history of poetry that active minds in search of some



“tradition” can follow and, after careful apprenticeship, claim as their own. My choice for consideration here is the polyvalent tradition of Investigative Poetics and its links with Projective Verse, Relational Poetics, and even Language Poetry, which provide theoretical structures for working with language to reveal both the formal, syntactic structures that make it work, and the cultural, connotative sources that make it mean something. These enabling traditions are, obviously, specific, each with their own histories and cast of poets. And, although there are numerous points of entry into these traditions, the one most relevant to an introduction to Investigative Poetics is Charles Olson.

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