REPUBLICS OF POETRY

by Ammiel Alcalay

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a little history

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I've been thinking a lot about a quote of Olson's I first encountered many years ago. In a short review of a book about Billy the Kid, originally published in 1954 and then reprinted in the 1967 edition of *Human Universe and Other Essays*, two paragraphs remain acute and hardly addressed in any larger sense:

It's this way. Here's this country with what accumulation it has—so many people having lived here a millennia. Which ought to mean (people being active, more or less) an amount, you'd figure, of things done, and said, more or less, as in other lands. And with some proportion of misery—for which read "reality," if you will wait a minute and not take "misery" as anything more than a characterization of unrelieved action or words. That is: what strikes one about the history of sd states, both as it has been converted into story and as there are those who are always looking for it to reappear as art—what has hit me, is, that it does stay, unrelieved. And thus loses what it was before it damn well was history, what urgency or laziness or misery it was to those who said and did what they did. Any transposition which doesn't have in it an expenditure at least the equal of what was spent, diminishes what was spent. And this is loss, loss in the present, which is the only place where history has context.

What needs to be done to ease this pressure of loss, to relieve the past? One can't help but try to contextualize things through the present, through the immediate present. As I was thinking about that, I was considering a letter by Robert Duncan written to Olson in 1963, May 9th I believe.

It was one of the things in the *H.D. Book* in which Duncan outlined the idea of generations, writers belonging to certain worlds, worlds they were born into and those worlds having certain qualities or characteristics. He mentions a remark by Gertrude Stein in *The Making of Americans,* something to the effect that an American doesn't know what he or she is doing until they are about twenty-eight years old. Duncan agreed, saying he was twenty-eight when he wrote *Medieval Scenes.* Then it took him another two years to figure out whether he knew if he knew what he was doing. Which made him thirty. And so, I took twenty-eight to thirty as being this generational marker and began thinking from the present backwards about how one might contextualize Olson in the present. Getting at this context, and looking at all the origins and erasures, has a lot to do with detecting shifts and transmissions between and across generations.

In a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Big Lebowski,* by the Coen brothers, two guys, played by John Goodman and Jeff Bridges, have a close friend who has just died of a heart attack. After having his body cremated, the friends are confronted with a problem. They have been given their friend's ashes by the funeral home, but, unable to afford an urn, they buy a large coffee can to hold the ashes. They decide to hold their own private service for him and are about to spread the ashes out over the Pacific Ocean. The character Goodman plays, Walter Sobchak, is a Vietnam vet who isn't, let's say, fully balanced:

WALTER SOBCHAK *(Goodman): …and as a surfer he explored the beaches of Southern California, from La Jolla to Leo Carillo, and up to Pismo. He died, he died as so many young men of his generation before his time. And you took him,*

Lord, you took him, as you took so many bright flowering young men, at Khe Sanh, at Lon Doc, and Hill 364. These young men gave their lives, so Donny, Donny who loved bowling…And so, Theodore Donald Karabatsos, in accordance with what we think your dying wishes might well have been, we commit your final mortal remains to the bosom of the Pacific Ocean which you loved so well. Goodnight, Sweet Prince—

[Opens coffee can with Donny's ashes in it; a wind blows towards them and the ashes fly away from the ocean and all over Goodman's friend, the Dude, played by Jeff Bridges]

WALTER: *Oh, shit, dude I'm sorry.*

THE DUDE *(Bridges): Goddamnit Walter, fucking asshole.*

WALTER: *I'm sorry.*

THE DUDE: *It's a fucking travesty with you, man. What was that shit about Vietnam? What the fuck does anything have to do with Vietnam? What the fuck are you talking about?*

That's what I wanted you to hear: that question. *What does anything have to do with Vietnam?* This is how I began to think generationally backwards. It takes us back, again, to George Bush Sr.'s quote in his inaugural address before the Gulf War: "the final lesson of Vietnam is first that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory." Going further back, there is a quote from the period near the end of Olson's life, the early 1970s:

We were sent to Vietnam to kill communism but we found instead that we were killing women and children. We knew the

saying "War is hell," and we knew also that wars take their toll in civilian casualties. In Vietnam, though, the greatest soldiers in the world, better armed and better equipped than the opposition, unleashed the power of the greatest technology of the world against thatched huts and mud paths. In the process, we created a nation of refugees, bomb craters, amputees, orphans, widows and prostitutes and we gave new meaning to the words of the Roman historian Tacitus: "Where they made a desert they called it peace." We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they have done and all they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission. To search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more. So when thirty years from now…

That "thirty years from now" would be a few years ago, around 2001. Back to 1971:

Our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm or a face and small boys ask why, we will be able to say "Vietnam" and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned, and where soldiers like us helped in the turning.

These are the words of John Kerry in his statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22nd 1971. One could look at this text and be amazed at the distance John Kerry traveled in his rise to political power. But one could also see evidence of something else. If one looks at

things in the light of deep politics and the precedent of assassination and political blackmail as political weapons—even holding the validity of the 2004 election results in abeyance, with the disenfranchisement of African-American voters and the possibility of rigged votes in parts of the country—we might reconsider our perceptions of the Kerry campaign for the presidency. Maybe the Democratic party didn't want to inherit the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the economic mess just yet; maybe, as Fred Dewey impressed upon me in examining this history, the Democratic party didn't want to win the election and didn't want John Kerry to become president, given his political history. Maybe his previous experiences, both as a Vietnam vet and through investigations he initiated as a Senator, particularly the Kerry Commission, precursor to the Iran-Contra hearings, and his later investigations into the financing of terrorism, gave him access to structural knowledge. In the case of what became the Iran-Contra hearings, Kerry's staff exposed the illegal activities of Oliver North, uncovering the financial network behind the illegal transfer of arms to the Contras. As a follow-up to this, after being denied a place on the official Congressional Iran-Contra Investigative Committee, Kerry pursued what the U.S. Senate ended up calling "one of the largest criminal enterprises in history." This enterprise, the Pakistan-based Bank of Credit and Commerce International, known as BCCI, was a model for international terrorist financing with deep roots in both parties and ties to senior and junior Bush administrations. However, the key element in my conjecture here, based on Dewey's research, has to do with Kerry's pursuit of Clark Clifford, a fundamental player in the Democratic party

machine since his days as Truman's fixer. Maybe John Kerry understood that he couldn't run against the Democratic party, and doing so would put either his political or real life in danger. Given our history, these are plausible conjectures, even if they seldom, if ever, are allowed to become "acceptable" topics of discussion.

Kerry's astonishing formulation, from 1971, made me think about memory, and where we place it, how we catalog it, where it goes and what happens to principles over time and their relation to memory. We are living in a supposedly "postmodern" world. The characteristics of that supposed world are very unlike the characteristics of what I think Olson meant by that term when he used it in his letter to Creeley in 1951. So I want to telescope us back to see where Olson fits as a path not taken by this culture, as somebody who may also have had his finger on the pulse of debates, of arguments and issues that have largely become non-debates, non-issues, false debates, false issues. To put it another way, Olson put his finger on matters that have become more and more important, however forgotten, buried, or unrelieved they may be now.

Olson was born in 1910. Robert Duncan called it being born in a "pre-World-War-world." He writes that Olson was "initiated into childhood—learned to walk and talk 'before the war' the last possible member of a creative family that we now sketch as having its *time* from 1882-1914." Duncan then goes on to characterize, in this generational mapping, 1945-on, as "the state of War economy with the idea of world destruction." This echoes the descriptive term "perpetual war" introduced by Muriel Rukeyser in the 1940s, long before the U.S. state openly and publicly adopted it as a doctrine. To make a slight digression here, interestingly enough, it was Rukeyser who provided the link between Duncan and the poet and activist Devise Levertov, through a review of Duncan's first book, *Heavenly City, Earthly City*, that caught Levertov's attention in 1948; and it was Rukeyser who would accompany Levertov to Hanoi in 1972, when Levertov's relationship with Duncan was strained to the breaking point. This crucial relationship, revealed in nearly 500 letters, exchanged between the poets from 1953 to 1988, can tell us, as co-editor of those letters Albert Gelpi writes, a lot about "how the imagination can and should address violence, how poetry can and should engage politics." For Duncan, life and the practice of art already were politics: "I write as I do and live as I do not because these are 'right' but because I want this kind of living and writing to come into existence."

What had been a life, Duncan's open homosexuality and long domestic relationship with the artist Jess Collins, had been turned, by society, into a "lifestyle." For Levertov, "words" had "to be filled with, backed up by, imaginative experience," something Duncan felt implied a reliance on "truth anterior or exterior to the realization of poetic form." Finally, though, for Levertov, commitment to "the movement" had nothing to do, overtly, with poetic form. She understood that "taking on the burden of action," as she says in *New & Selected Essays*, could be a source of "unforeseen blessings" and made life in such circumstances infinitely richer.

Duncan, on the other hand, believed in what he called a "Robin Hood or guerrilla existence. Not for the future. But from the beginning of life." Earlier in the same letter, dated March 30, 1968, Duncan takes Levertov to task for thinking that, in Paul Goodman's words, "We assume that

the Americans do not *really* will the Vietnam War but are morally asleep and brainwashed." This is "an assumption that I do not make," Duncan says, "in the face of half a century of living in America, of having American parents—I see the Vietnamese War (as I saw the Second World War) as a revelation of the truth of the potential evil of 'America'—Blake, Hawthorne, Melville, Lawrence—Whitman in his 'Eighteenth Presidency'... the Vietnamese War as a revelation of the truth of American Karma, what Commager calld [sic] the consequences of the unacknowledged, unrepresented crimes. There are those, even among those who feel Vietnam is a revelation of the evil, who think the carnage of Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo, Hiroshima 'was in a good cause.'"

Olson, like Robert Duncan's companion Jess Collins, was somebody who could have made a mark. These figures could have become official people, participating long-term at the highest levels in this country's political, scientific, and cultural establishment. Jess was an atomic engineer who worked at Los Alamos and at Hanford and had a dream, I believe it was in 1946, that the world would be destroyed. He left his engineering career behind and enrolled in art school. Olson had gone far as a child of immigrants, but he retained the consciousness of his class background. He went to Wesleyan University and at the age of twenty-two was already doing the kind of primary research that would establish his scholarly credentials in a field he would then begin to question and, eventually, leave behind. After pursuing research in the newly defined field of American civilization, Olson wrote in the 1930s about Melville. Olson's subsequent move into politics and his work under the Roosevelt administration was a turn away from the academy, just as his turn away from party politics would signal an even more radical stance towards knowledge, history, experience, community, narrative, and form.

In a letter to Van Wyck Brooks from Washington, dated 6 August 1945, Olson announces that the "Melville Book is finished." This would be *Call Me Ishmael*. As Ralph Maud, the Olson scholar, points out, it was chronologically after the A-bomb attacks on Japan that "Olson directed his attention to the cannibalism of the Essex story... Olson told Ann Charters that he wrote the introductory 'First Fact' on the ferry back from Nantucket on what was presumably Monday 20 August 1945." The kind of sentiments Olson began to express, about political corruption and "the big lie" the war had become, calling the "big war" a "defeat for the people," were much more apparent and visibly popular, that is, widely shared and in the open, *before* the war than after it. With the specter of the Cold War ahead, Olson, like Jess, chooses to retreat, and finds a different vantage point from which to work.

It would be good to recall some of the poet Bob Kaufman's activities in this context. In a documentary radio show written and produced by the poet and Jimi Hendrix biographer David Henderson, one of the founders of the Umbra Arts Workshop, George Kaufman recounts his brother Bob's experiences:

Bob and I lived together in New York when he was a seaman. I was a merchant seaman then too. He represented the National Maritime Union at conferences in London and France after the war. Then he got into politics. He was an area director for Henry Wallace's [presidential] campaign in 1948. The Progressive Party. He ran into some real problems. He was an

area director in the wrong area and he ran into some real serious problems with the police forces definitely trying to see his point of view wouldn't be heard in that area of the country. He was arrested many times, brutally beaten, thrown into jail cells with no heat and freezing conditions and kept there for a long time. But that never stopped him. He still had his own way of thinking.

Eventually, in Kaufman's case, maintaining his "own way of thinking" entailed complete withdrawal, in the form of a vow of silence he took after the assassination of JFK. He kept that vow until almost the end of the war in Vietnam. Olson's response occurs in a number of different ways. The first is through an engagement that I've previously mentioned, one that I think is crucial to understanding the place of politics and art in American society: Olson's relationship to Pound and Pound's trial.

When I talk about Olson responding, in Charles Stein's sense, turning away from this very real possibility of either becoming a very significant academic or person in Democratic party politics—he may even have been offered the position of Postmaster General, the ultimate patronage reward for good party service—it was clear to him that the world, and America's role in it, was going a certain way and he was going in another direction, an alternative direction.

When, in "This Is Yeats Speaking," Olson asks "what have you to help you hold in a single thought, reality and justice?," he addresses the question in its broadest possible terms—as a call for a new kind of ethics, a new kind of work based on new materials. In relation to this, he's quite clear on what the Cold War is about, what institutional affiliations are about, what is happening and where he has to go.

And coming back to memory and time and principle—he attempts to go across time, through place, by going to the Yucatan. He begins to try to research, and conceive of, culture in a holistic way, something that's only begun to happen in the last few decades, connecting archaeology and astronomy, anthropology, ecology, neurology, biology, and linguistics, relating these things and looking at production and culture as being of a piece and humanly connected. Olson's conceptualization of these things anticipates the most advanced contemporary thought linking genes to language and migration. And the interesting thing, especially in the present context, is that Olson went to the Yucatan to study the Maya at the same time that he had applied to get his Fulbright to go to Iraq. He was simultaneously fascinated with the Ancient Near East and the antiquity of the Ancient Near East. Olson was onto the fact that antiquity itself has an antiquity. He was simultaneously concerned with this in the case of North America and the "Old World." Mesopotamia had an antiquity that you would have to go back to, to the Neolithic and Paleolithic, and you would have to look at it in a full sense in order to even begin understanding anything. You'd have to do this concurrently with the pre-history of the Americas. You had to go back, as broadly and concretely as possible. It is significant, for instance, that the poet and translator Clayton Eshleman has dedicated much of his creative and intellectual energies to a major aspect of such an inquiry, culminating in his *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld.*

The concern with Pound, the interest in the antiquity of antiquity, awareness of the politics of knowledge, all these form a kind of pre-history to Olson's poetry. Here is where

I begin fitting into the picture, back to and just before I was born, generationally. Olson had two personal relationships, two friendships that were very important to his awareness and consciousness about what had taken place in Europe. My dates and some of the details on all this may not be fully accurate. But I believe the first of these friendships involved Corrado Cagli. Cagli was an Italian sculptor and painter and also happened to be the brother of Serena Basaldella, the wife of a very old Alcalay family friend, Mirko Basaldella, an Italian sculptor and painter. It is Mirko whom I always remember from my childhood, impeccably dressed, a chain-smoker, able to sculpt out of any and all possible materials, from the little figures of bulls he made out of tongue depressors when my brother or I were sick, to the masks made from the hoods of automobiles or the monumental totems, from bronze or driftwood. His brother-in-law Cagli had apparently come to this country from Italy because his daughter, I believe, was studying here. In checking his biographical information, I found the following: in 1938, as racial laws were instituted in Italy, because of his Jewish origins, Cagli became a refugee in Paris, then went from there to New York, where he had a studio. In 1941 he became an American citizen and enlisted in the army. As an American soldier, he was one of the people who entered a concentration camp, Buchenwald, and made a series of remarkable drawings of what he saw there. One of Olson's most important poems, a poem that really marks the terms of where the human race is at the time, a poem I have cited elsewhere in my work, written in 1946, is "La Préface." The poem refers both to what Cagli saw and to what another friend, the second person, Jacques Ribaud, a mathematician and French

Resistance fighter who became close to Olson in that period, experienced. Ribaud had been interned in a camp and was the person who actually ended up weighing, as the poem notes, "80 lbs." This is "La Préface":

The dead in via
in vita nuova
in the way
You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is.
You, do not speak who know not.

"I will die about April 1st …" going off
"I weigh, I think, 80 lbs…" scratch
"My name is NO RACE" address
Buchenwald new Altamira cave
With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.
Put war away with time, come into space.
It was May, precise date, 1940. I had air my lungs could breathe.
He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth.
It is now, precise, repeat. I talk of Bigmans organs
he, look, the lines! are polytopes.
And among the DPs—deathhead
at the apex
of the pyramid.

Birth in the house is the One of Sticks, cunnus in the crotch.
Draw it thus: ( ) 1910 (
It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.
Document means there are no flowers
and no parenthesis.

It is the radical, the root, he and I, two bodies
We put our hands to these dead.
The closed parenthesis reads: the dead bury the dead,
and it is not very interesting.
Open, the figure stands at the door, horror his
and gone, possessed, o new Osiris, Odysseus ship.
He put the body there as well as they did whom he killed.

Mark that arm. It is no longer gun.
We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead
crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground

The Babe
the Howling Babe

Having grown up with stories of the lucky ones who landed in Italian DP camps and others who had disappeared without a trace, the starkness and drama of this poem stuck with me from when I first encountered it as a teenager, even if I couldn't fully articulate the history whose context it forms, as I am now doing.

In a remarkable article called "Warlords of Atlantis: Chasing the Demon of Analogy in the America(s) of Lawrence, Artaud and Olson," André Spears writes:

"La Préface" not only announces the start of Olson's career as a poet, but also, in line with Artaud's continued work on the Tarahumara, the poem views humanity's radical, archaic commitment to the creative impulse as the most immediate means for contending with the midden of history.

In *Juniper Fuse*, Clayton Eshleman also points to "La Préface" as a marker, and specifically investigates the phrase "'My name is NO RACE' address / Buchenwald new Altamira cave":

Olson's presentation of Buchenwald and Altamira (shadowed by Odysseus' response to the Cyclops' question), with space rather than a verb between the two nouns, presents the reader with an overwhelming question: What do these two nouns have in common? The answer that I find suggests that the astonishing ancientness of the human creative impulse, which was discovered in this most inhuman century, may somehow offset total despair.

This same insight is further articulated by Jed Rasula in *The American Poetry Wax Museum*:

As had been known before, Olson abandoned a budding political career for poetry in the aftermath of the atomic bomb and the disclosure of the Holocaust. But the appearance of the Collected Poems, *edited by George Butterick (1987), made it clear that Olson turned to poetry as the most imaginatively expedient means of reckoning the cost, to the species, of such historical traumatization.*

Spears echoes this same fundamental but often overlooked principle when writing about Olson's "first published collection of (five) poems, Y & X (1948)," with Cagli's drawings:

This collection, like Olson's first major volume In Cold Hell, In Thicket *(1953), opens with "La Préface" ("Buchenwald new altamira cave"), the poem that stands as the clearest instance of his writings' ideological rootedness in the moral*

collapse of Western civilization after World War II... In addition, "La Préface" is the most succinct exposition of the archaeological scale by which Olson proposes to elaborate an enduring poetic response to the trauma of global warfare.

Olson's temporal scope never abandons the specifics in the insistence that all human time connects:

As an "archaeologist of morning," Olson is positioned to bring to his poetry the globalism and "post-modernism" of a Pleistocene perspective on history, from which he looks as far back as the discovery of fire and the invention of language to relocate humanity in the present.

Despite a severe language barrier, Olson's encounter with Cagli proceeded through gesture and symbol and he was able, in this short poem, to convey that profoundly human encounter and transfer of vital knowledge across what he once defined as the limitations any one of us is inside of. He did this through "a nail" drawing "the object of the hunt," "via stones a stick... a hand of earth."

My parents came from Belgrade and were refugees in WWII. They ended up in Italy where they were in hiding. My late father was a painter and he had his first exhibits in Rome right after that war, 1945–46. Then he ended up working as an art guide in the Vatican. And one of the people he knew in Rome was the sculptor and artist I just mentioned, Mirko Basaldella, Cagli's brother-in-law. So when my parents came to the United States, this thread somehow led us, after 1956, the year I was born, to visit Gloucester. We began to get involved with all these people who were there. First, there was Mary Shore who was an artist in Gloucester, eventually marrying Vincent Ferrini, the poet to whom *The Maximus Poems* are addressed. Olson had returned to Gloucester in the '40s, and Ferrini is somebody he goes to find and talk to because he realizes, through a poem he encountered in a small magazine, that here's maybe somebody he can talk to.

Vincent Ferrini was able, in his lifetime, to feel some sense of belated recognition as his *Selected Poems* finally came out from the University of Illinois in 2004, the first time he has been recognized in any academic way, after many, many books published by small presses, starting with his first, *No Smoke*, in 1941. Ferrini is mentioned at a number of points in *The Maximus Poems.* But he has also been consistently misrepresented as a secondary and transient interlocutor, as if his own past and continuing work did not embody part of a presence that Olson continually relied on. Happily, there have been correctives, through the work of Kenneth Warren in particular, but also in Olson's *Selected Letters*, edited by Ralph Maud. Ferrini is put back into the picture. Interestingly enough, Ferrini's repeated appearances at Beyond Baroque, from the late 1990s through to his death—the only national appearances he had made—served as a connecting tissue in my relationship to Fred Dewey, the growing awareness of the work Dewey was initiating at Beyond Baroque, and the start and continuation of our collaborative thinking through the deep politics of poetry and the work of Olson.

Olson's thoughts are precise when he declares Mary Shore and Vincent Ferrini to be "the one brother and sister that I have." This brings us back to one of the reasons Olson settled in Gloucester—in Vincent, he felt he found a worthy interlocutor, a living connection to a past of American poet-

ry and expression that had been almost completely obliterated or forced underground. The fact that Ferrini's *Selected Poems* appeared in a series edited by Cary Nelson, a scholar instrumental in recuperating American poets who have fallen through the cracks due to suppression and imposed narratives, particularly of the 1930s and 1950s, is significant.

Ferrini is a key link between the social activist, public poets of the 1930s and the "postmodern" condition, as it is defined by Olson. Of Italian immigrant background, Ferrini was a union organizer at General Electric during the depression years, on some very tough terrain, in Lynn, Massachusetts. Then he went to Gloucester and spent the rest of his life as a frame maker and a poet in and of Gloucester. As I said, Olson saw him as interlocutor and connector. And again, one of the crucial things about Olson—and this links to how I started this—is that by withdrawing into small societies, very small societies of peer groups, particularly Gloucester and then the societies that get built up around small magazines and around presses and around Black Mountain—these are the acts that, as Olson put it, "initiate another kind of Nation." In the early *Maximus Poems* there is this kind of frontal attack on Vincent Ferrini and on his magazine, *Four Winds*, that was begun in Gloucester. It's a crucial matter that has been taken very much out of context to obscure much deeper ties. One of the things that Olson is trying to say here is —if you're going to have an independent society, which is this magazine, an independent community, then it has to be as good as any other endeavor. I think at some point he even compares it to a fishing vessel where everybody on your crew would have to be tested, you wouldn't want to have somebody on that boat, on your crew, just because you *heard* they were good. That could be very dangerous. So Olson engages Ferrini. This is a key point about Olson's endeavor, particularly his major work *The Maximus Poems*. It has been put in a context that makes it harder to understand and still harder to get at. The false assumption is that one needs all kinds of erudition in order to approach something, one needs to know this, that, and the other thing. This represents the flip side of how the Beats, for one, have been treated. We are given the construct of two strains of American poetry: those deriving from Pound—one needs all kinds of esoteric knowledge in order to even open their books—and those deriving from Williams—their work is vernacular and emotional. Once these origins and splits are posited, everyone else becomes derivative or an imitator and gets erased. Poets are not looked at in the complexities of their own historical or poetic experience, as the result of generational differences and allegiances. They become codified, in Robert Lowell's terms, as "the raw and the cooked" schools of American poetry.

Very few people have written about these issues cogently; you can look at Rasula's essential and encyclopedic *The American Poetry Wax Museum*. There, in fact, he points out that "after 1960, when it was clear that Charles Olson could not be conveniently ignored, it became fashionable to dismiss or belittle him as a derivative poet, overly indebted to Pound and Williams." Things come up more specifically, in Edward Bruner's book *Cold War Poetry*, in a discussion, interestingly, about the *Maximus Poems* and comments Robert Lowell had made about Olson:

What remained invisible to Lowell was Olson's innovative return to bounded geography, for that in turn forced a recov-

ery of the issue of civic welfare (the problem of the "polis") as it was powerfully dramatized in the first three books: an interest in working-class values and history from down under, a no-nonsense revisionist approach to the founding of Massachusetts as a business venture and a deromanticized portrait of the sea as the ultimate dangerous working condition.

There's that famous poem by Olson where he talks about walking by that "bad sculpture" of a fisherman at the shore in Gloucester and he writes: "no difference / when men come back," all that is remembered is when they are lost at sea. In fact, although it might seeem like a narrow focus for such a massive endeavor, it is helpful to read *The Maximus Poems* in this light; work that is worth doing always entails risk.

The price one might pay for making a mistake in dangerous working conditions remains an example of work for Olson, just as his intellectual ethics referred back to the model of labor he had absorbed from his father's union activities, as in his 1952 letter to Merton Sealts, the Melville scholar, referred to earlier, in which Olson blasts the official world of Melville scholarship as "users—vulgarizers of a man they hold their jobs by."

Holding to an ethical standard, especially in terms of building and maintaining a community, is one of the reasons why the quality of Olson's engagement with Ferrini at *Four Winds* or with Cid Corman at *Origin* ultimately, and directly, enables the astonishing situation of a magazine like *Yugen,* edited by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Hettie Cohen/Jones, the possibility of linking up the most vibrant but isolated and far-flung elements of thought and poetry throughout the country while only having a circulation of a few hundred copies.

To date these things generationally, and put oneself into these histories—my own ties to this world, for instance, through experiences and memories of going to Gloucester as a child—is essential to figure out how things can be taken off the shelf and put back into the "polis," into the real living context of a place and its location of that place in a more collective, and plural, geographical history. This is very much the context of Baraka's debt to Olson, as described in an earlier quote, when Baraka speaks of putting "the hinge back on the door."

Returning to this idea of the small society, back to Gloucester, Olson was very clear about how all these things were being compressed and ruined at just the moment they were most needed—the very things people had to have to hold onto their experience and retain their independence. In the initial poem of *The Maximus Poems*, "I Maximus of Gloucester To You," he writes:

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,
that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen
when all is become billboards, when all, even silence, is spray-gunned?

The whole question of the commercial, of ownership, Olson's insight of looking at Massachusetts as an enterprise of business and work, and the founding of the country as an enterprise, not having any romanticism about that, pays dividends as things go on. The idea of engaging in a small society, of engaging in the exactitude of that—this is an aspect of Olson the scope of which has not been fully exam-

ined or acknowledged. Olson set the tone for what would become these societies of small magazines, but I think the reach and meaning is even more extensive. He sets it out in *Letters for Origin*, his correspondence with Cid Corman. The things he would continue to insist on come up in an initial letter:

But take a look at any little magazine, take a look at the PNY issue starring Apollinaire. What happens? The oldest thing here in these States: backtrailing, colonialism, culture scratching!

Any such endeavor has to have its own integrity, its own reason for being, its own purpose, its own standards, and its own work, otherwise it's not worth doing and isn't tested. It's in these kinds of things that one can begin to make a case for Olson as a major force in American thought and culture after WWII. A lot of things that happened afterwards would be unimaginable without that presence, without that work that was taking place from the mid-'40s through the '50s and begins to explode in the '60s, in the mid-'60s and later '60s—his research, his many friendships, his involvement and work in creating and sustaining clusters of activity and attention. I haven't even touched upon Black Mountain College or his experiments with the sacred mushroom and LSD.

One can trace something like *Origin*, Ferrini's *Four Winds, Yugen, Floating Bear*, and so many other small magazines, to the growth of a set of principles around the underground press, to the growth of the idea of independence, of autonomy of thought, of means, of distribution and these kinds of things. We need to look for different kinds, different scales and activities of remembering and forgetting amidst the indices and life of public memory, in the memory of

public life. The role of authority in all of these matters is crucial—how society shapes and destroys it, and how individuals, through the practice of an ethic of authority, can temper those deformities.

I'll leave the reviewer nameless, but I have here a 1975 piece from the *New York Times Book Review*. It's hard to even imagine the *New York Times* reviewing real books, significant books, but through this example, we can see what happens when they do. It happened. It's a review of *The Maximus Poems* in the Viking Press edition, together with *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*, and even *The Post Office*, Olson's memoir of his father, published in Bolinas by Grey Fox. The review takes up a whole page. It gives an indication of how Olson was already being framed five years after his death, by someone ostensibly sympathetic to his work. This comes at a point when I think even someone like myself (around twenty at that time) figured, well, maybe a whole cadre of scholars will come along and embalm the poet and entomb him in some kind of academic dust. This didn't happen—the few scholars who devoted themselves to Olson were unique and dedicated individuals. I'm thinking primarily of people like George Butterick and Ralph Maud, but also Ann Charters and Donald Allen very early on, Don Byrd, Charles Stein, Al Glover, Sherman Paul, Charles Boer, and younger people like Benjamin Friedlander and others that I'm sure I'm leaving out, not to mention people like Ed Dorn, John Clarke, or Fred Wah, all of whom enacted Olson's poetics in diverse ways, through independent kinds of scholarship. They didn't do it out of any sense of careerism—quite the contrary, as the *New York Times* opinion of Olson makes clear. It is here that we can see

that the paths not taken in the academy parallel those not taken in the culture generally. A major national paper codifies the general mechanics of how to officially handle Olson: he is defined as someone with great ambitions and a grand scheme but who is, on the whole, in the words of the *New York Times*, "a failure." How this is done is very clever. The operation undertaken is all about the arbitrary nature of authority, that is, authority with no, or arbitrary, standards—an issue Olson faced centrally in "This is Yeats Speaking." With no overt and disclosed criteria for what might constitute a "success" or a "failure," innuendo and the public and private spheres come into play, as if everything were taking place at a secret trial based on evidence and criteria that never make it into the record.

The review opens with what, superficially, would seem to be praise:

For twenty years or more Charles Olson has been a cult figure in American literature and a prophet of the Black Mountain poets…

To start with, these poets, of course, do not exist: there were no Black Mountain poets, just poets who went to Black Mountain.

…even to their second, third and successive indistinguishable generations.

It is not enough, that is, to pull in one generation, we must tar them all as "indistinguishable."

It is a fact to my mind, it is also a misfortune both for the man, i.e.: this posthumous reputation and for literature itself. We know what happens to cult figures. When the bubble bursts it bursts completely and they go down into academic oblivion. I hope this won't happen with Olson. But I fear it may.

Clearly, the definition of Olson, the enclosure of Olson as a cult figure, encodes him at the outset as not being worthy of serious attention, much the way we are asked to treat "conspiracy" theorists. We are made to feel sympathetic with the reviewer, then forced into joining him in the unpleasant task of literary execution. He has a heart. He feels sorry for Olson, and so should we. The paper goes on to this conclusion:

The Maximus Poems *is a huge and truly angelic effort. It needs prolonged reading and extended commentary. Here, all I can do is record my feeling that Olson succeeded only in parts. The whole is a failure.*

This business of killing through compliments is, indeed, a fine art. The *New York Times*, in a sense, sealed the official view of what this work should and should not be considered as. The practice continues. The *New York Times* obituary, on 4/1/05, of Robert Creeley—whose friendship with Olson proved so important and fruitful—bears this out. The emphasis in the obituary involves the choice of quotations and the inclusion of a critic of no literary standing as an obligatory detractor—"There are two things to be said about Creeley's poems," the critic John Simon wrote. "They are short; they are not short enough." Such stratagems serve to buffer and neutralize the effect and importance of Creeley as a major writer and thinker, especially in relation to a vibrant and critical history that must be disappeared to maintain

administrative control over experience and history. The obituary begins: "Robert Creeley... helped transform postwar American poetry by making it more conversational and emotionally direct." It then goes on to emphasize Creeley's relationship to William Carlos Williams's "vernacular style, casual diction and free-verse rhythms." While couched in apparently genteel terms, the exact equivalent of this treatment of Creeley would be to extol a "natural sense of rhythm" in the work of Langston Hughes. How different would the effect of this account have been had the reporter started like this: "Robert Creeley, following in the line of classic American poets and thinkers like Dickinson, Emerson, and Thoreau was one of the formulators of the concept of 'postmodernity,' a category that has come to mean something very different from what he and fellow poet Charles Olson originally delineated in 1951." Had such an obituary been written, I contend, we would be living in another country.

Q&A

Audience: The review, as a whole, took Olson's oeuvre as a failure. All his work was a complete failure?

Ammiel Alcalay: Yes, it was a grand effort and it was a great endeavor but a failure. In this kind of thing, there is no indication of what, as I said, success might entail. Or what the terms are to begin with. What would success mean? To whom? What is the meaning of that whole terminology?

Anne Waldman: You talk about why he left the Office of War Information and those kinds of decisions. I was interested in hearing you say that, had he stayed, he could have been a player. Can we get more context there? And about his not getting the Fulbright to go to Iraq?

Basil King: There was also the painter, Ben Shahn, who worked with Olson under Roosevelt and the two of them left pretty much at the same time…

Alcalay: The reasons were myriad. Roosevelt dies. The "big lie," Olson's interpretation of the result of the war, was a bitter response to hopes he might have once held. I think he could not see himself partaking in what was coming, he saw very clearly what kind of machine was being put into place, a machine both beholden to and creating special interests, that was going to effect all aspects of life, especially the endeavor of research, of intellectual thought and activity, the transmission and location of knowledge.

Waldman: It's unfortunate in a way because you want people like that "inside." I feel like this myself—sort of clamoring at the gates and wanting to be more effective. How do you become more effective, when you have to sort of swallow, and you're inside this thing... How do you get opportunities to make that radical shift?

Alcalay: I don't know what the answer to that is. I mean I think one can take it either way. I recommend everybody read the Robert Duncan/Denise Levertov correspondence. Duncan pulls out of the whole situation and probably has, ultimately, more effect on life as it gets lived by actual people than many others. His exclusion from official culture, once he wrote "The Homosexual in Society" in 1944, is

rarely looked at, for example, in the context of gay culture even though his actual life, as he chose to live it with Jess Collins, embodied a radical individual political decision with far-reaching consequences. Obviously, in Olson's case, to continue on in party politics was, I think, from a temperamental position as well, a non-starter. He was outside. But his poetics were a constant calling forth of a polity, a constituency, he clearly wanted a forum and wanted to create something that wasn't there yet.

Waldman: I also see him as "the archaeologist of morning," through those images of him at the end, those little pieces of paper, gathering information, the shards, the mind that's so myriad, and yet trying to hold it all in consciousness.

André Spears: To follow-up on what you said about Olson as the poet of the American path not taken... It's wrenching—Olson would be turning in his grave now over what's happened in America. But maybe not. I'm just wondering—talking about Truman and Roosevelt, thinking about Reagan and Bush—are you saying that rather than being the poet of an American path not taken we should look at another path that perhaps is being taken but perhaps not revealed, or one that is concealed and not acknowledged? Is that what you mean with this business of the small community, the small poetry magazines? How does one not despair, how do you not despair at this, how do you read a poet or a path not taken, an American path not taken without despairing, without positing at some level that there already is a path, but it's hidden. Is that what you're implying?

Alcalay: I'm trying to be specific about the time of this endeavor. Times change, obviously, but what I meant by a path not taken was that Olson was onto a lot of things about the—I don't want to use the word "nature"—but the elements out of which this country has mythologized itself and established itself and how that all works. He was on to them through his research and thinking about Melville, about Massachusetts, about the West and the gold rush, then Iraq and Mesopotamia, the Mayans, and the nature of the "West" as a whole. A lot of what has manifested itself are things that were nascent throughout this period. He has these lines: "…having descried the nation to write a republic in gloom on Watch House Point." And that's kind of where it ends up, "in gloom on Watch House Point." From Gloucester, from my own roots and the ways I have gone about absorbing the possibilities of these roles, looking at this nation, the Olson lesson, it seems to me, is that one cannot be intellectually reclusive; one can be involved as a poet with poetry as fundamental fact, as a fundamental basis for facts and how one absorbs knowledge about the world, how one responds to the world. That can take different forms. One can engage in different ways with real life institutions and real life issues and problems using fundamental knowledge that is gained through encounters like these, through that kind of encounter that Olson has with Cid Corman, in establishing the critical parameters that would go into *Origin*, for instance. That might seem like a small act, but it doesn't have to be. Ultimately, in the scheme of things, it actually isn't small at all. When I go into thinking about how I'm going to do an editorial for the *New York Times* or whatever other context I might find myself in and how I am going to deal with a particular situation—what it is going to lead to, what does it mean, how

will it get manifested—I always keep in mind the effects Olson had on people, personally, in the human realm, through letters, through the force of his suggestions or ideas. When I came back from spending a number of years in Jerusalem, I was privy to precise and useful information because of the people I knew and met and all the activities I had been involved in. Had I chosen to, I could have attempted to market that experience to a place like the Sunday Magazine at the *New York Times*. I had the contacts, and certainly there was interest. But I realized that by doing that, I would be doing something to that experience and information that I didn't want to do. It would become part of that system, and so become disposable. Instead, I set about to write a long letter to Robert Creeley. He had been invited to read in Jerusalem and I thought he ought to know what he was getting into, since the political public relations propaganda machine there very much relied on using cultural figures. In other words, it was completely clear to me that passing this information and point of view on to Bob, a single individual, was more important, in the larger scheme of things, than publishing it in a mass circulation magazine. The letter was eventually published, with Bob's blessing. Olson was very clear about this practical transmission from person to person. It's a very particular American genius, if you will, that Olson locates in Charles Pierce, and prior to William James, in pragmatism as practice, *how* one practices. This comes to fruition in Olson's study of Whitehead—and here is yet another path not taken, for how many people today read or think about Whitehead? My point is, I think it's a question of not exactly the results but the process, how work moves between people, and what kind of solidarity remains in the integrity

of memory as activities and meanings become codified for general consumption.

Audience: The Italian artist that you mentioned, are you saying by that that there was a European influence?

Alcalay: Let me do a little quick gluing here, because there was so much to put in. His meeting with this particular artist, Corrado Cagli, was very personal and immediate—Cagli was bringing him news about what had happened, what was happening in Europe, and very first-hand news, as Olson also got from Jacques Ribaud. If one looks historically, as far as I can tell, the poem that I read is the first to respond particularly to what was happening. Cagli was the conveyer of that experience and knowledge and Olson, unlike many in the U.S., was receptive, and receptive in a unique and defining way.

Audience: Are you saying that Olson approached this years before it was generally acknowledged?

Alcalay: Olson transmitted this very immediate personal news into indelible markers—this is where we are: "no race," "new Altamira cave," "address Buchenwald." This is where the race is, the human race. That's our new address. Any other way of looking at it is not realistic. My whole connection to this—my parents had been part of this émigré artists' scene in Rome and then when they came to this country, that was our connection to Gloucester, through these people Olson had known previously. Again, one looks at this huge oeuvre of Olson's—the essays, *Call Me Ishmael, The Maximus Poems, The Collected Poems*, etc.—

all produced by somebody who lived in poverty in a tenement in Gloucester. One of my father's favorite stories about Olson was of calling the Olsons on a hot summer night to see if they wanted to go to a movie and Charles's wife Betty saying "Well, Albert, I don't think we can do it, we don't have any money." And Charles saying in the background, "Wait a second, I just got a check for three bucks from the *Partisan Review*, so let's to go the movies." That's where things were at. And I think that's something to keep in mind—the costs, both personally, to him, and family-wise, to his own relationships, to his children—and what it meant at that stage to opt out, what it meant to stick by that, for better or worse.

Audience: It strikes me that during the time of the '50s and '60s, if you were a college student, an English major, you were under the New Criticism, which was only the text, no background whatsoever.

Alcalay: Olson was very prescient about this, in that letter to Ruth Benedict where he asks when are we supposed to cut the knot with all the information and the facts and how do you turn fact into fable. He was very clear about this. In teaching a literary text, even a single poem, I think one needs about eighty or a hundred books around it, just to think about it, to think historically—where does this thing fit? We're still coming out of an era where the poem is an artifact and there's nothing outside it. Olson was very clear about this when he looked at Melville. There was a world there that had to be plumbed, a world that had to be known about, that had to be extrapolated from. One can see this in Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, a very Olsonian project. One

can see it in a writer like Susan Howe, in her book *My Emily Dickinson,* where she reconstitutes a world of the real in which Emily Dickinson's poems can then be situated. I think that's why Duncan's generational thing is so valuable. He said, alright, so this is a person who lived, breathed, and was nursed in this particular time. What does that mean, what are the constituents of that world that go unconsciously into the making of that text or that poem? How did that person live? What choices did they make?

Audience: Because of the isolation here there is very little cultural space in which to opt out—I'm thinking of Germany now, for instance, where you still seem to have this cultural space, at least that's been my experience…

Alcalay: It's hard to put oneself in any time and space outside one's own. It'd be easier to ask somebody who was in Olson's time. But there's a quote that keeps coming back to me, where Gary Snyder said that in the 1950s in America, you would hitchhike a thousand miles just to stay with a friend. I think that says something about the relations of friends and space and what it might mean to be with, or what you would do in order to be with, somebody. Gloucester for Olson was also very much a place he felt at home in. In some of the clips from the out-takes of the show done on Olson in the 1960s, for what was then National Educational Television, you see him walking around the neighborhood. He's a figure, he was a letter carrier summers, he knew everybody. He'd been going there since he was five, and his mother moved there after his father died. He went out sword fishing a number of times and on other expeditions. He was a known figure, every-

body knew him. There's a terrific book, *Maximus To Gloucester,* that the writer Peter Anastas edited, with a forward by the poet Gerrit Lansing, another key Olson friend and interlocutor from the area. Peter Anastas is a Gloucester writer whose parents had a soda fountain that I used to go to, the Anastas Soda Fountain. Peter did this book of Olson's letters to the Gloucester newspaper, which had to do with a variety of urban development issues, local civic things that were going on, so he was very much part of that, while also having this voluminous correspondence life with people who were all over the place. The letters are an incredible resource. Another person I haven't mentioned who plays a crucial part in all of this is Frances Boldereff. Many of his key ideas were developed in that correspondence. Boldereff was a Joyce and Blake scholar. Just a remarkable correspondence. Key ideas get fleshed-out in this intense two-to-three year period where they're corresponding sometimes two, three, four times a day. All these paths and paths not taken: the connection to Ferrini in Gloucester and the movement through him across worlds of poetry, from the '30s, through the Beats and the postmodern; the voluminous correspondences with people like Boldereff, not part of any official literary or cultural history but who was deeply influential; the students from Black Mountain like John Wieners or Ed Dorn, who form individual paths or constellations all their own—in even this brief catalog, we can see Olson as focal point from which not only paths must be taken, but from which a fundamental remapping of what we think we know of our history and experience can begin.