

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## On Charles Olson

Robert Wood · Wednesday, January 24th, 2018

I had taken a leaf out of Henry David Thoreau's book, and was living alone in the wilderness at the time, living 'at one with nature' down in Redgate. I was there on some sort of quest – to see myself reflected in the bush, to get in touch, to finally write 'all this' out of my system before I got on with meaningful and important. I was a hermit, disciplining myself with yoga, a steady diet of kangaroo and visiting places of profound importance that were in my local region. I had visited Walden, and though I had always preferred his neighbour Ralph Emerson, I was desperately trying to mimic these Americans as if they would know the direction that I was headed in. I had adapted what I knew from Australian anthropology, the *Upanishads* and the Romantics, but I knew I was 'post-modern' in a literal sense, as Charles Olson defined it.

Olson was my constant companion in those days, the poet who fired my interest as I sought to map out my own Gloucester but in a different way. I read and re-read *Maximus*, filling in the pages with my words so that you had to read us in dialogue, my blue and red pen complementing the neat printed ink of his 'hand'. It was a conversation, a filling in of the white silence with a kind of reading exercise that allowed me to write myself into that corner of history, the one right there in New England. His work now became ours down in the antipodes. From Olson there was:

*Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood  
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus  
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you  
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of  
the present dance*

With me it became:

*Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood                      that was spilled on this here place, musket,  
tannin, tallow, tarry, spa, sparrow, finch,                      jewels & miracles, I, Maximus minimised, set  
again at the door, the error of our ways in coming              a metal hot from boiling water, tell you  
that I have returned to show you what is the what as it              what is a lance, who obeys the  
figures of the shore where surf, off-shore wind                      the present dance of us outdoor  
right here for*

Olson speaks on one side of the page, in one colour, I on the other in another. We back and forth like black and white keys on a grand piano, like two men in a tango. I had taken America to Australia, or better yet, Massachusetts to Margaret River, or better yet, Dogtown to Redgate. I made it new for myself in the place I called home, no longer writing outdoors on a tree stump but

sitting at the entrance of caves I had introduced myself to. It was an education in how to converse with a hero of sorts, a way to realise what is possible when one sees the blankness around the words as an invitation to occupy space rather than remain silent.

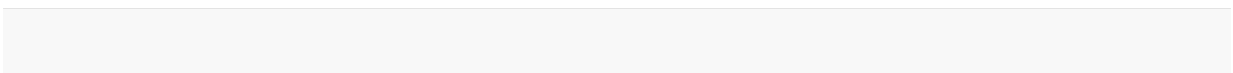
There is, of course, the reverse process, where one can find the poetry in the conversation through sampling and spacing, through making silence. When I printed chapbooks for a press I called work & tumble, I published Kate Middleton's *No Land*. Hers was a 'gleaning' of S P Mais' *This Unknown Island*, which was a work of white man hubris. Mais' text was a search for King Arthur's resting place punctuated with British Romantic tropes – fields, sheep, cobblestones, daffodils, horses. It also railed against 'the contemporary' identifying the cinema as particularly pernicious. In Middleton's hands, Mais' text becomes a kind of mourning, a haunted landscape that connects to an imaginary of Australia, the flag planted in the black soil that has been here before and worked over by all kinds of Indigenous peoples. Middleton's is a work of critique, a work of finding the empire even when all appears to be bucolic. You know the tea they have in Jane Austen? That came to England via slaves in the Caribbean. You know the mahogany they have in Charlotte Bronte? That came to England via slaves in Indonesia. You know the jewels in the Crown of the Queen who sits on the throne that rules over a still too vast dominion? They came to England via slaves in India.

The revolutionary appeal of America as a kind of speaking back to England, of Olson speaking back to Mais, the dialogue between my and Middleton's source texts, is complicated by the displacement of Indigenous subjects in Massachusetts and the rest of the nation. One also cannot let go of the continuation of violence waged in 'America's' name in the present, from its internal policing of black bodies to the drones that fly through Syria. This is about a second order colonialism, a new wave that comes after the British, the Dutch, the Portuguese and their mercenaries and traders. It is though a useful source text, a vocabulary we can use to describe our world in a way that is relatable.

The politics of Olson, of yoking form to content as is often quoted, means that we cannot separate heuristics that are common when we think of the dialectics that are necessary to undo the congealed aspects of our poetics. In other words, America can be both empire and settler as can Australia. I can be both freedom fighter and occupier and in the subtlety of the off-shore breeze, in watching for the next set of waves to roll in, we might do well to attend to a dialogue with history and world literature once again. In that conversation we see that the past is infinite in such a way that we might begin to adjust our lens and with it our sense of time and place.

In Redgate, there is a tree stump that you could once have written on, a place to place your typewriter or laptop or paper on. We cut it down because it was close to the house and the local fire department gave us directions on what constitutes a hazard. But now, out of the top, out of a stump that was once barren and lifeless, showing its rings of age, there are green shoots. There are stalks and leaves and a bushy head where once there was nothing. The clean break, even that which is cut for its own good, resets what is possible, provides a standing soil into which we plant the seed for all our futures no matter if they are jewels & miracles or simply nightmares of what might yet come to pass.

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