

CHARLES OLSON AND JOB: A SENSE OF PLACE

JOB 38:1-11; 42:1-6

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Someone asked how my cycling in Quebec was last week. I said it was wonderful. Eight of us rented a farm house out of which we cycled each day in the highlands of the eastern townships – two hours east of Montreal.

John Hurley, vice president of Canisius College and I spent most of our days mapping and riding over hill and dale. Will Clarkson and his younger brother Steven, a professor from the University of Toronto rode together. Dave Quackenbush, Mitch Flynn, Gordy Gross and his niece Susan Cooperman formed riding groups through the week.

One night on the porch overlooking the beautiful New Hampshire-like country side where our farm house was located we got to talking about what we think of when we are riding. Our conclusion: no philosophizing or solving world concerns. But very particular things like: Can I make it up this hill? What will the surface be like around the next bend? When will I be hungry enough to eat my Cliff bar?

Hence the appeal of cycling – you disengage the crunching of data and problem solving. You live out of the box of daily deadlines and rationalizations. The result: I actually felt more alive after a few days of cycling than when I left busy Buffalo a few days before.

I want to invite us over the next three weeks to visit three great American poets: Charles Olson today, Susan Howe next week, John Ashbery the week after that.

We did this two summers ago when we talked about Jesus and Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams and Robert Duncan. My thesis is that you and I, people of faith, share the life of the spirit with poets and painters. Artists take us beyond our sometimes limited perspectives and help us see and hear the larger truth and meaning of life.

With Olson, Howe and Ashbery I'd like to consider biblical texts that resonate with the poet's own voice. Today Charles Olson and The Book of Job.

I mention my cycling experience in Quebec because in a way reading the poetry of Charles Olson or the experience of Job is like riding a bicycle all day – you disengage from the seemingly important things of daily life and open your heart and mind to really seeing and feeling what it is to be a human being.

Life in the information age is unrelentingly organized, rational and processed. This is what lies at the root of the deep spiritual hunger of our time – formatting life into project spread sheets and power-points. Olson, Job, or cycling for a week in the eastern townships breaks that illusion.

Charles Olson was born in Worcester, MA in 1910, moved at an early age and grew up in the coastal town of Gloucester. Like William Carlos Williams' Paterson, NJ Olson's Gloucester became the locus of his great epic work, *The Maximus Poems*.

Olson attended Wesleyan and Harvard. At Harvard he started but did not finish a Ph.D. in American Studies. Yet, his work on Herman Melville and *Moby Dick* is still

valuable scholarship. More importantly it became for Olson the fountainhead of his poetic muse.

In the 1950s, Charles Olson was Rector of Black Mountain College in Black Mountain, NC. Black Mountain was a small and struggling, radical alternative to traditional colleges. Though it did not last long its faculty and students became the movers and shakers of American arts and letters in the later half of the twentieth century.

John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley are a few of the Black Mountain luminaries.

Of interest to us is that Olson taught for a few years, at the end of his career, here in Buffalo in UB's English department.

In addition to his poetry Olson was an essayist. In 1950, he wrote an important seven page article entitled, "Projective Verse." It might not be too much to say that this little essay changed the course of contemporary American poetry.

Olson's statement became the manifesto for a new generation of American poets by invoking the revolutionary vision of America's first modern poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

Olson's own unique insights into the source and life of poems in "Projective Verse" continue to give life and inspiration to poets.

Perhaps Olson's greatest contribution to you and me is his unrelenting commitment to see life as an "open field" rather than a "closed system." His literary lens was geography, SPACE, as he wrote in capital letters emphasizing its large importance.

And what do we do with geography, with SPACE? We explore it. We experience it. We enter into it and follow where we will and where we can. And here is a paradox. We enter into the world – all that is particular and is given to us as human beings – by going backward and forward at the same time.

In his epic *Maximus Poems* Olson goes back by going home to Gloucester, MA. He pours over old maps, history, texts, historical diggings, the data of what our species is – all read in the dark and light of the Divine Intention.^[i]

Olson's sense of place was that each place contains the events, the vectors of energy, that took place in it. Just as this church contains the ministry and voices of our ancestors.

His method is like peeling back the onion layers of history in Gloucester. He seeks to unravel its stories from the time of its creation through the English settlers and native Indians to the great fishing fleets to the present.

He was so committed to the idea that places carry the energy of their past that he once opposed the widening of an old street in Gloucester because its rich past would be lost forever to future residents.

Olson knew that you and I are fighting for our lives each day, except that some days we don't even know it. Fighting against the rudderless drift of existence that occurs when we are not located. "Locate me in your poetry," Olson said to an aspiring poet one day. "Orientate me."^[iii] Once 'located' we can then move forward.

What is poetry if it is not the making of the home we have? The discovery of where we live and with whom. Olson thought of himself, peeling the layers of history back, as an “archeologist of the morning.” His goal was not to stay fixed in the past but to share with his readers a new day of possibility from the perspective of our past.

There is an existential and mystical quality to Olson’s entering into the open field of life. Jackson Pollack put it this way, “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing....I try to let it come through. It is when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess.”^[iii]

There is a certain resonance between Olson and Job. Like the afflicted Job, much of Olson’s adult life was afflicted. He says he gave up everything to achieve concentration, to locate himself in each day, to avoid the closed system of modern society.

Olson differs from Job in that much of his tragedy was self-inflicted. But done in the spirit of engaging life with authenticity – come what may.

You get the feeling reading the poetry of Olson or the poetry of Job that here is a life liberated. A life anchored in the past; living in open-ended celebration of the here and now, of all that creation in the particular places we inhabit has to offer.

The scales of deadening routine, of rudderless living have fallen away from Olson’s and Job’s eyes. Rain falls on the good and bad alike. But underneath even life’s struggle and tragedy is the life giving energy at the core of the cosmos.

What is a poem, Olson wondered if not the energy of a particular thing that quickens the heart of the poet, that the poet in turn transfers to the heart of the reader. Reading Olson or Job is to have our hearts quickened by the energy of creation.

Time forbids the reading of chapters 38 through 42 of Job or even all of the three page Maximus poem “a third morning it’s beautiful.”

But when Phil shared those opening lines of God’s response to Job, to his “closed system advisors” and to their easy explanations for Job’s suffering, what we heard was the poet going backward and forward at the same time.

“Who shut the sea with doors....made the clouds its garment....made the morning since your days began....caused the dawn to know its place....so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth?” The poet probes the particularity of the world to locate Job, to orientate Job so that he may go forward. Which in the closing lines of our reading today he does, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Or Olson in “a third morning it’s beautiful.” “Praise the mystery of creation that in matter alone, the soul said, I don’t care how much you have felt free in the heavens of composite natures, of discriminated natures, and of myself, said the soul, now you shall not walk around the heaven beyond me, “That is no way for thee.”

Like Job’s, Olson’s life is split open to the mystery and grandeur of creation through his encounter with “matter alone” in this case an island in Gloucester harbor at 10:58am on February 7, 1966.

And like Job, Olson answers the divine voice of the soul – “how could the heaven of the soul itself say ‘that is no way for thee’ how could I be left as the cormorant with no more flight than our own Rock? Which leaves only in effect and only [if the instance here reported for days] once a year takes off, and not even from the land, seems only as the cormorant itself laboriously gains flight just at water-level, and lands, almost as soon as in flight, on the spindle, where have we gone? And what is the ‘prison’ the soul says you shall stay in? It is none, my Island has taught me.”^[iv]

No longer imprisoned, no longer adrift in life Olson has located himself in the holiness and history of Gloucester and Job in the particularity of the creation around him. Both have located themselves in the holy scheme of creation.

Isn’t that the peace for which each of us longs and searches each day? And once having found it cannot bottle and keep it but must search again and again in each new day. There is a sense of discovery but of illusive reconciliation in these poets.

Each day offers a choice: locate yourself in the place and with the people where you live or enter life adrift.

One of the amazing things about my week in Quebec was the hummingbird feeder hanging in front of our wicker chairs on the porch where we gathered to rest and reflect.

They came at the end of the day, the hummingbirds. First tentatively, then like neighbors sharing this marvelous gathering place of a porch that fed us body and soul.

Wings a blur, beaks as sure and steady as a surgeon’s hand, placed purposefully into the portal of the feeder. These brave little birds, migrators of continents, revealing their creaturely-ness to us coming to drink.

Our Quebec excursion would have been immeasurably poorer had we not stopped from our conversation when the birds came and watched them.

It makes you want to repent, like Job, for all the times you were blind to the world around you and just drifted through your days. Amen.

^[i] Robert Creeley, “Introduction,” to Collected Prose, Charles Olson ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) xiv.

^[iii] Charles Olson, “Letter to Elaine Feinstein,” Collected Prose, Charles Olson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 239.

^[iii] Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Selected Writings, ed. with introduction by Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions Press, 1966) 7.

^[iv] Charles Olson, Maximus Poems, ed. by George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 493.