

A Little History: The Deeply Personal as Political
(Some notes on a book by Ammiel Alcalay)

There were two events in the mid 90s which really opened my eyes to the power of poetry. Interviewing Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure in 1994 and 1995, respectively. While Ginsberg was the one whose work I had been familiar with longer, it was McClure's that hit me as the deeper gesture. Interview over, we headed for Vietnamese spring rolls and on the way back from lunch, McClure told me that if I liked what he did, it was because of the process he used, Projective Verse. That began a near twenty year investigation of the legendary essay by Charles Olson.

I knew McClure's gesture to be deep, but also playful. Certainly it was quite political. Perhaps I was tipped off to the stance by Robert Hunter's introduction in which he writes about McClure's "decidedly anarcho-leftist politic." But that inkling was reinforced with lines like:

I
HATED
HATED
HATED
the bombers flying over.
I could not save them or myself.
Napalm. The demon self
with soft eyes. Stabbing
Hamlet in the throne room. Discover
you are Hamlet with the blade
up your ass.

There's the humility that McClure had (looking back) realizing he was as off course as those dropping the bombs and defoliant. There is the oddness of the layout and capital letters. The abstractions are earned and there is a maximum of meaning and wordmusic: the soft alliteration in lines 4-7 above of the letter s, with the rhyme of *myself* with *demon self* adding the m sound, the assonance of *stabbing* and *Hamlet* ending the stanza with the surprise of that blade up the ass. I could go on, nature poem, imagist poem, love poem and paean to concentration, as anyone with experience writing organically knows is extremely difficult.

But McClure deferred to Olson and Olson was combining 'istorin' ("finding out for one's self") with muthos ("what is said") to return history to a verbal process located

in the body. With little stake in the industry-generated culture (especially before the explosion of MFA programs) this stance-toward-poem making gave the poet (with little financial incentive to corrupt the artistic gesture) the use of history, as Diane di Prima would put it, as a tool:

history is a living weapon in yr hand
& you have imagined it, it is thus that you
"find out for yourself"
history is the dream of what can be...

But I'd find few on this same journey. Few who truly understood the power of the projective. Those who had even heard of Projective Verse or Organic Poetry, suggesting I'd missed something in the meantime, between 1965 (Olson's legendary performance at the Berkeley Poetry Conference) and say 1980, when LANGUAGE poetry had ascended as THE avant garde movement in North American poetics.

Alone is a good place for a poet to be, as long as the isolation is used with creativity and humility. Still working on those qualities, and like McClure, not able to save the bombers or my self just yet.

a little history

And in steps Ammiel Alcalay with *a little history*. In his bright introduction, editor Fred Dewey (of Beyond Baroque fame) would frame the content as "investigating international politics through the lens... of Charles Olson... [which] builds up the historical existence of a poetics serious and powerful enough to respond to the world, to facts and events, *from* the world" (i). Alcalay has not been quiet or found a place to which he'd retreat and contemplate things in serenity. He'd find himself translating the work of people like Jose Kozar, or living in Jerusalem, doing some investigation into his own personal mythology (as a Sephardic Jew), making work by Jewish and Arab thinkers available to the West. Also in Bosnia, during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, editing the book that illustrated the phrase which entered common use at that time, "ethnic cleansing." Here's a man not afraid to get into the middle of shitstorms.

So I pick up his trail at this point and offer some thoughts on some of the more interesting or poignant passages that I noted during my first read of the book *a little history*, as if I were to interview Alcalay, marking potential points of inquiry. My first stop was when there was some validation for my own course of study, someone

who agrees with the limitations of the main philosophical justifications for LANGUAGE Poetry:

While “deconstruction” has been the reigning theoretical rage in academia, driven by fantasies of rendering Western culture powerless through critical discourse, projects characterized by construction, reconstruction, and historical recuperation provide people with real political footing (10).

Validation for those going for content, those interested in a “saturation job” another of Olson’s ideas, in which one learns more about a subject than any other person alive. Validation for my own look at Northwest history in *A Time Before Slaughter* and its continuation *Pig War & Other Songs of Cascadia*.

A Cosmology

Alcalay goes in to introduce us to Syrian-born poet Adonis, suggesting that, “he occupies a space in the history of language as far removed from possible from what he has referred to as ‘the poet as manufacturer who transforms words into a product’” (12). He points out for contemporary Arab poets writing as prisoners or exiles, “language becomes a dwelling place significantly more tangible and real than the bookish homelands fashioned by current theories.” Alcalay writes that Adonis calls the “total poem” one that:

ceases to be merely an emotional moment but becomes a global moment in which the institutions of philosophy, science and religion embrace each other. The new poem is not only a new form of expression but also a form of existence (13).

Here’s where Olson and Robin Blaser and di Prima in that poem mentioned before all come in with their notion of a cosmology and this is a central point in *a little history*. One’s cosmology is revealed regardless of what you do, so why not think about that, develop it. Those innovative poets in the 40s and 50s felt a special need to do that, as the old gods were dying and the new ones not yet discovered.

It does not take Alcalay long to identify one of the key ingredients, perhaps the single most important one, in the best poetry, imagination. How liberating a force. (Is it divinity?) Williams’s *Spring & All* was a huge influence on Alcalay and 90 years after its original publication, remains huge in its importance and in its insistence on the necessity for imagination to be in the poem:

The inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits can only result in himself crushing humiliation unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. This is possible by aid of the imagination. Only through the agency of this force can a man feel himself moved largely with sympathetic pulses at work --

A work of the imagination which fails to release the senses in accordance with this major requisite -- the sympathies, the intelligence in its selective world, fails at the elucidation, the alleviation which is --

In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality -- Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression (27).

In Alcalay's position, shortly after 911 -- early on in the Bush Administration, when the seeds of liberation planted in the U.S. in the 60s looked like they were going to be stomped out by the declared permanent war, is one of hope,

While conventional wisdom has it that culture and writing are too marginalized to matter, the opposite holds true -- it is through poetry that new relations, disruptions, and interventions can occur, that assumptions can be challenged and the imagination opened up (22).

This hope is tinted by Alcalay's reminder that early on in the second US war in Iraq, in the wake of 911, how U.S. troops made sure the Ministry of Petroleum was protected while "a million books and ten million documents were destroyed in the fires of April 14, 2003 alone" (24). He reminds us of the seizure of state archives and the targeting and systematic assassinations of Iraq's academics was part of the plan all along. Remember di Prima's warning from Rant: "The only war that matters is the war against the imagination. All other wars are subsumed in it." Alcalay continues:

The way that one ushers in and makes use of newly introduced and revived texts is key. Are they there to ease one's conscience or do they present formal, intellectual, philosophic, and ethical challenges (27)?

...most people in the United States remain ignorant of their government's policies abroad. This is no doubt because of the country's vast global military, corporate and cultural reach. As concentration and consolidation in media and publishing reach unprecedented levels, the channels through which translated texts or autonomous representations of other cultures can be transmitted and emerge into the public realm have narrowed, even with the internet (28).

In particular, the lack of personal relationships between North American intellectuals and especially with their counterparts in the Middle East has made it much easier for official propaganda to dominate the discursive space available. The absence of this human connection has removed our primary line of defense, allowing an ensuing vacuum to fill up with disinformation, with things that occupy the space where real exchange would arise (29).

Alcalay segues into a discussion of the numbers of writers, intellectuals and activists from the Islamic world:

who have been censored, imprisoned, tortured, assassinated or disappeared, and who have put their experiences into writing fully as rich and philosophically complex as anything we are familiar with constitutes one of the great human sagas of our time (29)

and that:

the need for an archeology to excavate and represent this, and do so systematically, is absolute and essential, and belongs in the realm of public health (30).

Yet on our continent, he likens the lack of imagination at the end of the "information age" as a fatal flaw. A sort of picket line we have constructed, cannot cross and "forgotten even exists." This, to me, reinforces the notion I first saw articulated by Peter Russel in his book *The Global Brain Awakens*. There is a great chart in the book which shows the US American economy from 1776 through the near future. Agriculture dominates the economy with the numbers of jobs and total revenues until 1900, at which time it is eclipsed by what started as agriculture

processing, or Industry. Industry is dominant until 1975 when Information succeeds it as the driver of the economy. We're in it now, the so-called Information Age. It's exemplified by the fascination with celebrity and athlete worship and other diversions and also by a story or graphic which was making the rounds of the internet in the last year. It's about someone from "the future" (2013) going back 30 years and, when explaining the biggest change in life at this time, they say they "have a device in their pocket which gives them instant access to all of the information ever compiled by humankind." "Wow! What do you use it for?" "Arguing with strangers and looking at pictures of cats." So what comes after the Information Age? Russel argues the "Conscious Age" which can be seen as Consciousness Processing. How do we begin to make sense of the glut of information? What quality allows us to differentiate a life-saving (or improving) message from one designed to simply take money out of our pocket? Alcalay's on to this:

Defining what information is for us, where it comes from, and where to find it becomes an essential survival skill. But this retrieval and definition also starts at home, with materials we need to reclaim as our own, outside the codes and constraints of administrative control (31).

It is not long after this passage that we get the most beautiful image in the book, one of Alcalay:

playing badminton with the 6 ft. 7 in. Charles Olson in the back yard as a five year old... I was lucky enough to grow up having all those small press books and little magazines around the house. My parents were interested and involved in such things -- we had *Black Mountain Review*, *Evergreen*, *Big Table*, *Yogen*, etc. around, so when I started exploring, these were the things I encountered. Kerouac, Burroughs, Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Douglas Woolf, Denise Levertov, Diane di Prima, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka -- those were familiar names (36).

On the next page Alcalay makes reference to the "explosion of creativity" in the US and elsewhere, between 1950 and 1970, likening it to the T'ang Dynasty, Abbassides, Italian Renaissance and the Elizabethans. He asks "what is the obverse of American 'exceptionalism'" in terms of a "positive cultural and experiential sense." I have always resonated with this notion, that this period was exceptional, if only from my position as a USAmerican. I think of the real flowering of Bebop and folks like Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, the Free Jazz and Black Arts

movements, The Living Theater and all kinds of Improv (Second City, The Committee, &c) and the birth and development of Rock n Roll perhaps culminating with Woodstock. Gestalt psychotherapy, Abstract Expressionism, innovations in dance such as the emergence of Merce Cunningham, alternative movements like The Beats and Fluxus, those schools of poetry he mentioned above, The Vancouver and Berkeley Poetry Conferences, the beginnings of performance art and the environmental movement, the flowering of Buddhism and an awakening in consciousness in general epitomized by places like Esalen. The list goes on and on.

Of course this is balanced by the US American foreign policy during this period, the debacles in Korea and Vietnam, the economic war against Cuba, the Cold War, as well as the economic realities which reached a peak during this period (most likely because of the high level of union membership and the emphasis on progressive education initiatives like the G.I. Bill) and the foreshadowings of 40 plus years of economic warfare against unions and the middle class starting with the Reagan Administration. In 2013, in Alcalay's words, "we remain wedded to the [US] American con-game that you can get something for nothing. Of course the Bank Bailout of 2008 shows you can, in a plutocracy. When the Attorney General of the United States confesses before a Congressional Committee that some banks are indeed too big to prosecute."¹

The combination of the influence of capital (which Alcalay says "like water, it will take up whatever space it can occupy") and the vacuous nature of life at the end of the information age and the end of capitalism (casino capitalism era) is exemplified by the case, Alcalay says he read in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, of the young novelist who got a \$500,000 advance for the first novel and \$1,000,000 advance for the second. Explaining this situation, Alcalay says:

I have to see the current *overpayment* of a select group of writers as an attempt to glut the market and create something if a useless commodity out of writing -- something apparently necessary but, like the VCR that can be programmed two years in advance, useless.

The kind of writing I am used to is, first and foremost, a necessity for the writer. Only then, in my opinion, can it become a necessity for its readers. The audience for this writing tends to be smaller in number (42).

¹ www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/06/eric-holder-banks-too-big_n_2821741.html

Alcalay is not espousing elitism but is indicating what impulse interests him. His stance, perhaps understood better in places where the industry-generated culture is not dominant, is evocative of the quote by the playwright Richard Foreman who said:

To me, in this fallen world, the question that true literature prompts is never "what does it mean" but rather: what circumstances (what kind of perceived world) have given rise to writing of this kind, which is trying to provoke a different way of "being in the world," and why? Writing that does not provoke this question, but aims instead at meaning--is entertainment...²

And, as such, this kind of art goes to a deeper place, a deeper level of consciousness than today's million-dollar novelist. This kind of art, which affects the person reading it not just on a content level, but in a way that Williams, Olson, Duncan and other poets, quite at a high level of output during that aforementioned North American renaissance, understood as working as a field works. It is a transmission that happens the way iron filings are splayed around the limits of a magnetic field. There is an appeal that happens on a level much deeper than conscious knowledge. Of course, when art is created by someone who, in the moment, goes beyond their own conscious knowledge to a place or state beyond their small "s" self, they tap into the larger fields available. Language is just one field poets engage in larger than their owns selves. This is what led Robert Duncan to say he does not "use" language, but cooperates with it. As Alcalay says at the end of one chapter:

Books and poems may serve as some of the surest and last pathways back into experience, back into the values of experience, and so back int the world we actually live in (44).

There are little nuggets spread out throughout the book, such as showing how Dana Gioia, when tapped to head the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts, was described as "non-political" though he was said to have voted for George W. Bush and his father for President. One shows an earlier draft of the U.S. National Anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, written in the wake of U.S. "victories" in North Africa in 1805, quintessential USAmerican payback for Morocco being the second country to recognize the U.S. (after France) with lines like:

And a turban'd head bowed to the terrible glare (55).

² <http://miscproj.blogspot.com/>

More Radical

rad·i·cal

[rad-i-kuhl]

adjective

1. of or going to the [root](#) or origin; fundamental: a radical difference.³

Alcalay gets to the meat of Olson's importance when he inuits that Olson presents, "a more radical and critical project that what is presented as theoretically radical and critical in the academy" (57). The academy, after all, is an institution dedicated to preserving certain things (the status quo among them) and, talk all you want about critical inquiry, there is something threatening in facilitating an environment where one of Olson's primary concerns is addressed, "determine what and where the knowledge is that one should know. and how one should get to it" (57). Alcalay lets Amiri Baraka bring the importance of Olson home as he gets into the depth and breadth of Olson's radical approach:

You are talking about somebody who can link up the Roosevelt campaign [as a former bureaucrat who served in the FDR administration] with Mayan practices in one swoop. I think the problem is that they have reduced poetry again to abstract metaphor and they are not trying to teach you anything. They are trying to be ironic or to make you feel sad or happy, but it is not a teaching instrument anymore. The idea of you teaching, and then to be emotionally raised up, that to me is what a poet is supposed to do. The educational process, the political process along with the emotional charge, that is supposed to be one thing. And with the whole motion of the 1960s, what the poetry began, they are covering it up again. It is like the door opened and the door closed. It is a near tragedy, but one that has to be fought back against. You have to fight that because what they do, they bring in another wave of academic people who are just talking about nothing at all. They refuse to talk about the world (80).

I have spent a lot of time investigating what I believe to be at the root of this fallout between talking about something and talking about nothing. The schism between abstract metaphor and being in the actual world. Olson recognizes it as the split in the ancient Greek worldview between myth and logos, when that system and culture began to grant autonomy to thought (the intellect) away from the concrete

³ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/radical?s=t>

and experiential. The Newtonian/Cartesian world view was only an exacerbation of this tendency, but sure gave it momentum and the industrial age gave it velocity. The *it* in this case is materialism. The only things that exist are, well, *things*. The energetic, and with it whole ancient cultures and cosmologies were rendered “primitive,” quaint, outdated. A world view that does not have an explanation for plain, old-fashioned human consciousness. It is known as Materialism which Olson calls “the gross things which won, here, then.” he was speaking of the USAmerican Civil war as the “then” and says in his century it became an “international civil war.” A war which USAmerica is winning at the expense of anything that is animated by a force (consciousness) whose existence can’t be proven, namely humans, angels, animals and I would argue plants, dirt and rocks as well.

Olson the Feminist

In chapter 5, Alcalay challenges the notion that Olson was patriarchal, submitting testimony from poets like Anne Waldman, Eileen Myles, Kathy Acker, Susan Howe, Rosemarie Waldrop, Hettie Jones, Kathleen Fraser, Joanne Kyger, Alice Notley (“who and what we commit ourselves to makes all the difference”), Kristen Prevallet, Daphne Marlatt, Diane di Prima and others who have cited Olson’s influence on their work and thought. Alcalay writes, “a narrow liberal feminist critique too often ignores class issues and obfuscates the character of Olson’s influence” (152). I am immediately drawn to a notion of Robert Duncan’s on a similar issue. Lisa Jarnot, in her long-awaited biography on Duncan *The Ambassador from Venus* noted at a reading in San Diego in March 1976, Duncan said:

I would have questions about any of the new minority movements simply because it seems to me that the whole issue of our time is that we barely... hold on to ... writing as human beings, which is the hardest thing of all to do. To write as a woman or to write as a man or to write as a black or to write as a gay poet is absolutely minor compared with ‘how do we hold this new human consciousness’ (329).

How many in this day and age make a name for themselves by being for something that limits them? Duncan pointed out a few groups here and surely the challenges such folks must overcome are serious and I would not want to suggest anything to the contrary. I rarely bring up my Cuban immigrant mother in my own writing because of an aversion to such categorizations or labels which, ultimately, are there to control or pigeon-hole us. But Duncan believed such stances were limiting. We are all humans trying to become more fully human, some of us reaching the state of noble humans and trying to use

supporting forces (animal, vegetable, mineral) in the best and highest way, with reverence, gratitude and humility. We can make a name for ourselves in the poetry community, politics and elsewhere by catering to the needs and often the prejudices of groups defined by race, religion, ethnic background, political views or any number of subdivisions. It has been said that humans are more often brought together by their prejudices, which makes Duncan's stance (one Olson no doubt shared) as a lonely one. But such a stance is one empowering the noble human and, once understood, one goes back at the expense of their own humanity. If open, one can sense this in the writing if one has experienced the noble state of being, which most of us have. To experience this and revert to something less can never be hidden by the writing. The fields emit this timidity, this lack of courage, this ego-centrism. This is part of Olson's powerful field of resonance and why he'll continue to be a factor for centuries to come.

The points made by poets cited by Alcalay in this chapter are stunning and numerous. Kathleen Fraser quotes Susan Howe's notion that "Olson's *acute visual sensitivity* separates *The Maximus Poems* from *The Cantos* and *Paterson*" (166). Fraser calls Olson's "PROJECTIVE VERSE" an:

immense, permission-giving moment and says his, "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 close case (166).

Olson himself is made clear on the issue with a 1965 statement re-published by Alcalay, stating:

Feminine / Writing so that all the World / is redeemed, and
history / and all that politics, / and "State" and Subjection / are
for once, done away with, / as the reason / of writing (150)

And Fraser brings the importance of Olson's example and his poetics home quite clearly when she writes:

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 to 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 (166).

Perpetual War

Just before Olson's publication of *Projective Verse*, in 1949 Muriel Rukeyser published her book of talks and broadcasts from the 1940s entitled *The Life of Poetry*. She recognized by that time, the end of World War II that the U.S. was basically a country that embraced "the concept of perpetual war." Olson, as noted earlier saw this as "an international civil war" of materialism. The materialist, or reductionist world view does not value that which it cannot see and, ultimately, devalues it and places it on the other side of an invisible dividing line, as enemy. Alcalay quoting the Critical Art Ensemble calls it "the triumph over representation over being." How else can one explain why a majority of USAMericans five years after the start of the Iraq war believed that Iraq was somehow involved in the events of September 11th? So many things become clear when seen from this angle and it is a thread that goes throughout Olson's work and is at the substrate of his method. "Find out for yourself." His notion of proprioception is referenced in the book. We have devices that can suss things of import and give us guidance and are called "bodies." In a world where technology is aiding and beginning to replace actual thinking, this notion (not unique to Olson, but part of the foundation of his stance-toward-reality) becomes more and more important. Alcalay quotes poet and essayist David Baptiste-Chirot as saying:

After Olson, American poetry has lost a lot of interest in the kinds of speeds Olson write of -- those of perception, breath, human nerves, actions, awarenesses as a kind of continual training for writing poetry and for being in the world (185).

And Baraka is brought in again, from an essay of "Why American Poetry is Boring, Again" saying that a poetry of the actual is being "eschewed. Instead there is a desire for belonging, safety, all the comforts of Homeland Security... the "blunt consideration" of playing it safe, not "saying something," to protect one's career (186). He says this is an entropy when compared to a poetry of the actual. Poet Sam Hamill warns that most "poets" are engaged in poetry for socialization and reinforcement. After all, when one does not have contact with something outside of their small "s" selves, constant reinforcement is

necessary. Whether through publication, awards, grants, readings, invitations to conferences, &c, the rewards are on the outside reinforcing the less than noble inside. It is remarkable that these are the bulk of the poets who DO get grants and other awards, as their focus is almost relentlessly this positioning and is akin to a survival mechanism with all the ferocity of an ego under attack. Of course they miss the terms of someone like Laura (Riding) Jackson who, writing in 1928 said she believes writing is “how one constructs one’s self out of the wreckage [which is] reality” (194).

Responding to “recent critiques that would see Olson as the imperial outsider projecting the white world’s fantasy upon non-white peoples” Alcalay states “it is well nigh impossible to assimilate such readings into either his lacerating critiques of North American imperial domination or his own actions in decidedly removing himself from access to the power structures that were available to him” (202). This statement anticipated future attacks on Olson, such as the one recently translated into English from the original Spanish of Heriberto Yépez, whose book *The Empire of Neomemory* has a mocking drawing of Olson with his fingers to his lips in a gesture as if he were talking to a baby making sounds by emitting noise while rhythmically touching his lips. Are there legitimate critiques that can be made of Olson, no doubt. But recall Alice Notley’s notion, “who and what we commit ourselves to makes all the difference” and if we commit ourselves to ridicule, the noble escapes us. Especially when the ridicule is aimed at a man who so dedicated his life to standing up for the working class, for humans, for consciousness, against the perpetual, international, civil war and those who would perpetrate it. But so caught up in the culture manufactured by these same forces, Alcalay argues that:

Interpreting [US]American poetry through an ideological framework -- to actually discern what a poet emphasizes, values or ignores - has become a lost art. As complex as Olson’s *Maximus Poems* are, for example, we can grasp a lot by always keeping in mind one of its central, very simple messages: work worth doing entails risk, and such work should be honored and celebrated (206, 207).

Olson would be happy that his work continues to be there, for USE. Those who would dismiss him as patriarchal, derivative, or any other such qualities have other fish to fry and limit themselves from the act of becoming fully open and human and recognizing one of the great achievements in 20th Century literature, a gesture that was part of a great period of creativity in

post-World War II North America. Alcalay senses it, articulates it as well as it has been done and create numerous widows of opportunity for future poets and other artists to move through as well. His work here is to be honored and that it forced me to think and note as much as I did is my own way of acknowledging his success and honoring it in this small way.

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