CHAPTER 12

Towards a Post-Beat Poetics

CHARLES OLSON’S LOCALISM AND THE SECOND SOPHISTIC

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It is a cliché to call Charles Olson (1910–70) the towering figure in the postwar American poetic tradition.1 As much as for his sheer physical size (he was 6’8”), Olson stood out among his contemporary poets and intellectuals for the scope of his vision, not only in his far-reaching pedagogic aims, as the one-time rector of Black Mountain College, nor simply as the author of the Poundian epic The Maximus Poems but also in his definition of a new poetics in his groundbreaking essays on literature, history, and culture (Olson 1997b). His central role in Donald Allen’s influential anthology The New American Poetry, 1945–1960 (1999) for example, was not only as a poet but also as a theorist of poetry and culture. Olson came first in this anthology of poetry and poetics, and his own contributions included a larger selection of poetry than any other poet’s, as well as two pieces of criticism (“Projective Verse” and “Letter to Elaine Feinstein”).

For some, however, Olson’s towering presence represented an arrogant and patronizing intellectual pedantry. In a 1968 interview for The Paris Review by the poet Ted Berrigan, for example, Jack Kerouac reacts in the following way when asked about the date and place of composition of one of his own works:

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1. See Fredman 1993 for an account of Olson’s significance, not only for the postwar period of American poetry but also for how he took on the mantle of a combination of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman for his own time.
KEROUAC: First part written in Mexico, second part written in . . . Mexico. That’s right, Nineteen fifty-five first part, ’56 second part. What’s the importance about that? I’m not Charles Olson, the great artist!

INTERVIEWER: We’re just getting the facts.

KEROUAC: Charles Olson gives you all the dates. You know. Everything about how he found the hound dog on the beach in Gloucester. Found somebody jacking-off on the beach at . . . what do they call it? Vancouver Beach? Dig Dog River? . . . Dogtown. That’s what they call it, “Dogtown.” Well this is Shit-town on the Merrimack. Lowell is called “Shit-town on the Merrimack.” I’m not going to write a poem and insult my town. But if I was six foot six I could write anything, couldn’t I? (Berrigan 2005, 72).

Kerouac here accuses Olson of a pedantic (and even sentimental) localism, whereby he records historical minutiae and recounts in intricate detail mundane events of a specific, insignificant place. As we shall see, Olson’s localism is far from sentimental, but a more expansive conception of the intimate union of identity, place, and time. In addition to the accusation of localism, Kerouac’s gruff dismissal of Olson is part of a larger antagonism between the two authors, specifically in terms of their respective claims to primacy in articulating creative ideals of spontaneity. Olson’s 1950 poetic manifesto “Projective Verse” called for a poetics of the breath and a harnessing of the energy of language—“the HEAD, by the way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (Olson 1997b, 242). As Daniel Belgrad notes: “The relation of beat poetry to Charles Olson’s projective verse reflects the semiautonomous development of a common aesthetic” (Belgrad 1998, 199).

Yet earlier in the same 1968 Berrigan interview, Kerouac dismissed Olson’s “Projective Verse” as having no direct influence on his own literary style:

I formulated the theory of breath as measure, in prose and verse, never mind what Olson, Charles Olson, says, I formulated that theory in 1953 at the request of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Then there’s the raciness and freedom and humor of jazz instead of all that dreary analysis. (Berrigan 2005, 66)

In more generous terms, as Allen Ginsberg has noted, Kerouac was writing projective verse according to Olson’s terminology. Yet rather than simply not acknowledging a poetic debt, Kerouac’s attack on the very idea of analysis becomes part of the characterization of the Beat aesthetic against the academic pedantry of the Black Mountain poets (among others). What is key in the Kerouac-Olson exchange, however, and what will be the main focus of this
essay, is how Olson will formulate a “post-Beat” poetics in terms of his expansive conception of localism. Furthermore, at the risk of adding to this accusation of pedantry, this essay considers how Olson’s articulations of changes in his poetics in the years following “Projective Verse” rely not only on an engagement with the Beats, but also on a conception of history and ideas of localism that he had discovered in the period of Greek literary activity in the Roman Empire of the first three centuries CE known as the Second Sophistic. This was a period characterized by a sense of nostalgia and belatedness, as Greek writers looked to the literary and intellectual traditions of the classical period (5th–4th centuries BCE) for cultural moorings within the context of a globalizing Roman empire. Greek orators, literary writers, and historians under Roman rule modeled themselves stylistically on the early classical authors, hoping to restore through emulation what they regarded as the transcendent values of the classical era. The “localizing” impulse to which Olson responded in some of these authors, was part of this project of cultural recovery and maintenance, which sought to recover not only basic information about a grand, but ever receding, past, but also the feel of that past through the experience of encountering particular monuments and topographies that had been left for posterity. Olson’s particular interest in this later period of classical antiquity is unusual and, as we will see, illuminating as a way into some idiosyncratic aspects of his own poetics.

While Kerouac evoked Olson’s physical stature to attack his localism and dismiss his poetics, he misunderstood the sheer range of vision of this localism and Olson’s own role in articulating a post-Beat poetics. In the important letter-essay written in 1959 and included in Allen’s 1960 anthology, Olson makes the following—admittedly vatic and confusing—claim about both the Beats and his conception of localism:

Nothing was happening as of the poem itself—ding and zing or something. It was referential to reality. And that a p[iss] poor crawling actuarial “real”—good enough to keep banks and insurance companies, plus mediocre governments etc. But not Poetry’s Truth like my friends from the American Underground [aka the Beats] cry and spit in the face of “Time.”

The Image also has to be taken by a double: that is, if you bisect a parabola you get an enantiomorph (The Hopi say what goes on over there isn’t happening here therefore it isn’t the same: pure “localism” of space-time, but

2. For a useful account of the Second Sophistic, both its history and the ways in which modern scholars have conceptualized this period, see Whitmarsh 2005.
3. For a fruitful discussion of Olson’s localism and the limits of this term to describe his poetic project, see von Hallberg 1978, 57–59.
such localism can now be called: what you find out for yrself (ˈistorin) keeps all accompanying circumstance. (Olson 1997b, 251)

Olson’s reference to the Greek verb historein—a complicated word meaning something between “to make inquiry” and “to form a judgment based upon inquiry”—which is so central to his work, was likely grounded in the classical historian Herodotus, who used both the noun historie and verb historein to refer to his own historical project. Yet by the mid-1950s, Olson saw the writers of the Second Sophistic (Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre, and Pausanias) as demarcating a form of localized historical inquiry which aligned with his own and enabled him to propose a post-Beat poetics in the late 1950s. In what follows, we will revisit several key moments in Olson’s articulation of his affinity with the authors of the Second Sophistic and see how it was Pausanias in particular whom he utilized to formulate his conception of localism, both in relation to, and as a means to surpass, key figures of the Beat movement and the central claims of Beat poetics.

The Roots of Olson’s Localism

In the spring of 1962, Olson was invited by Wilfred Hamlin, a literature professor at Goddard College, an experimental college in rural Vermont, and a fellow alumnus of Black Mountain college, to deliver a reading of his poetry at Goddard. As Kyle Schlesinger notes in the introduction to his transcription, however, this was not a typical poetry reading. He cites, for example, Olson’s opening remarks about his own resistance to and divergences from such traditional readings. When asked if he minded being recorded, Olson replied:

No. As a matter of fact I’m going to just watch it like a fire—let’s sit here and watch that tape [laughter]. What happens if it just goes on and I don’t say anything? Who knows? See, that’s the problem with reading, it gets to be kind of a bore, because it’s a performing art, you feel as though you have an audience, and as if you’re supposed to do a concert or something. I don’t think I believe in verse in this respect at all. As a matter of fact, I know I don’t. (Schlesinger 2011, 1)

4. On the semantics of historie and its cognate forms, see Bakker 2002.
5. We have the original recording (available on the Slought Foundation Website: https://slought.org/resources/olson_1962_reading) and in two recent transcriptions: Maud 2010 and Schlesinger 2011.
As he continues with his lecture, Olson does much more than read his poetry, instead framing it and commenting on it through a broader discussion of his influences and their impact on his thinking. The poems he reads are from the fifth book of his *Maximus* series, which would eventually be published in 1968 in a volume containing the fourth, fifth, and sixth books. Olson introduces his protagonist Maximus as follows:

I mean this creature Maximus addresses himself to, to a city, which in the instance is, is Gloucester, which, then in turn, happens to be Massachusetts. That is Gloucester, Massachusetts. I'm not at all under the impression that it is necessarily more to Gloucester, Massachusetts, in any more meaningful sense than the creature is, either me, or whom he originally was intended as, which was a, was Maximus of Tyre, . . . [who] mostly wandered around the Mediterranean world from the center, from the, from the old capital of Tyre, talking about one thing—Homer's *Odyssey*. I don't have much more of an impression of him than that. I've tried to read his [works] and found them not as interesting as I expected. (Schlesinger 2011, 2)

After admitting his limited reading of Maximus, Olson proceeds to articulate what Maximus represents for Olson's own age and how it is that age that interests Olson:

But he represents to me some sort of a figure, that centers, much more than, much more than the 2nd Century A. D. In fact, as far as I feel it like, he's like the neighbor of the world, and uh, in saying that I'm not being poetic or loose, uh. (ibid.)

After a taste of the earlier, published *Maximus* poems, the reading from the fifth book begins with a poem called *A Later Note on Letter #15*, which is Olson's attempt to elucidate his earlier comments:

**A Later Note on Letter #15**

In English the poetics became meubles—furniture—thereafter (after 1630

& Descartes was the value

until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
by getting the universe in (as against man alone
& that concept of history (not Herodotus’s which was a verb, to find out for yourself:

‘istorin, which makes any one’s acts a finding out for him or her self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides [sic], or the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot

—live television or what—is a lie

as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being self-satisfaction with Whitehead’s important corollary: that no event is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal event

The poetics of such a situation are yet to be found out.

January 15, 1962
(Olson 1983, 249)

Olson here juxtaposes Herodotus and Thucydides (whose name he does spell correctly elsewhere!) in terms of what he takes to be their basic differences in historical method, that is Herodotus’s “finding out for oneself” and then assessing his sources (historein) as opposed to Thucydides as the tape recorder, the live television—in other words the historian as reporter. When he reaches his reading of the sixth poem, with his audience already attuned to this distinction, Olson adds another ancient voice into the mix—one that is closer in time to Maximus of Tyre: Pausanias.

CHARLES OLSON: Now number six is—has actually got a title. It’s called “Book Two Chapter 37.” And it has nothing whatsoever to do with anything, but if you have the power of recognition or the experience of whom I am imitating, you will know:

I. Beginning at the hill of Middle Street the city which consists most—

CHARLES OLSON: Is there somebody speaking? Did I hear voices? Oh, it’s that tape talking back at me. I knew it would object! [laughter]

I. Beginning at the hill of Middle Street the city which consists mostly of wharves & houses reaches down to the sea. It is bounded on the one side by the River Annisquam, and on the other by the stream or entrance to the inner harbor. In the Fort at this entrance are the images of stone and there is another place near the river where there is a seated wooden image of Demeter. The city’s own wooden image of the goddess is on a hill along the next ridge above Middle Street between the two towers of a church called the Lady of Good Voyage. There is also a stone image of Aphrodite beside the sea. 2. But the spot where the river comes into the sea is reserved for the special Hydra called the Lernean monster, the particular worship of the city, though it is proven to be recent and the particular tablets of Poseidon written on copper in the shape of a heart prove to be likewise new.

CHARLES OLSON: Anybody recognize who that is, beside myself? No?
UNKNOWN VOICE: Is he a Greek?
CHARLES OLSON: Ye a h.
UNKNOWN VOICE: Herodotus?
CHARLES OLSON: Uh no, it’s Pausanias. It’s Pausanias’ Description of Greece in the second century AD. Do you know that poem? It’s remarkable, it’s very, very, very—to me, like twin to Herodotus. He was a, he was a traveller, again like the boys of—like everybody—see like On the Road, you know. For, for, for really, like those first two centuries you know, I mean like wow, talk about being knocked out. [Laughter from audience] Nobody was at home! And in fact they did the thing that like anybody does who moves, they found very interesting things, [Laughter from Olson] and Pausanias, I think that Pausanias’ Description of Greece is one of those—is comparable to “Herodotus,” [Snaps fingers twice] I
think for our minds, I think for our interests, yea. [Three strikes against a matchbox] You know everything has gotten very interesting and very complicated and very intellectual, and very satisfying for inquiry. Honestly, expression has lost ground rapidly, and a look, see, is really in business. [Blows out a match] I mean this boy is really a cat. Like Plutarch, ya dig? A contemporary, by the way. Plutarch, again, second century. Crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy record. If the Twentieth-Century has one resemblance, it has four, but it has one, one is the second century. (Schlesinger 2011, 13–14)

Olson here uses the Greek writing of the Roman Empire in the cultural milieu of the second century CE in general and Pausanias in particular (whose text he creatively dubs a poem), not only to build on the differences between the Classical Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides in terms of historical method but also to characterize the Beat movement, here represented by Kerouac’s On the Road. The comparison is more than just a celebration of the itinerant figures of the Second Sophistic and the protagonists of Kerouac’s road-novel. For both, travel is vital for seeing things for oneself and the road becomes the means to understand layers of history and culture while not getting stuck or hung up on either.

A year later, in the summer of 1963, Olson attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference, along with some fully-fledged Beats—Allen Ginsberg and Philip Whalen, as well as other figures like Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, less central to the “movement.” In one of the discussions, which included Creeley, Duncan, Ginsberg, Whalen, and Olson, the topic was “History” at Creeley’s request:

I would like to center on the question of context . . . because I think the first day we were here the poems were still isolated from quote “actual events” unquote, and I’d like to take it not so much into the whole business of what you can do with a poem, where you can put it or hang it on the wall, but where, what is, “history”? (Maud 2010, 46)

Olson responds to Creeley’s request by reading the other piece published in Yugen 8 called “Place; & Names” (Olson 1997b, 200–201). This short piece is hard to categorize—it looks like a poem, but reads like prose and appears in Olson’s Collected Prose, and it was not part of the Maximus series. Nonetheless, it acts as the theoretical underpinning of the Maximus Poem “Book 2,

chapter 37.” In fact, at the end of the discussion, Olson not only reads “Place; & Names” again, but follows it with “Book 2, chapter 37.” As with the Goddard reading, it is worth paying attention to how Olson frames his reading here (my emphasis):

ROBERT DUNCAN: Let’s read the “Place; & Names” again.

ROBERT CREELEY: Yes, relocate.

CHARLES OLSON: I will. And in light of what we’ve been talking about, and Robert’s statement that if Allen did what he said he would do it would be like Pausanias, a curious thing happened. There’s a poem which appears in published form as though it was the proof of the proposition. And for the hell of it, as long as I’ve got the proof in front of me, I’ll continue, after rereading it, and read you the poem which is called “Bk ii chapter 37” and is simply a secret statement that it is book two, chapter thirty-seven of Pausanias [Olson then reads “Place; & Names” with a few asides] So, let me end my pitch with a poem, uh? “Bk ii chapter 37.” It’s from the Maximus poems:

1. Beginning at the hill of

Yeah, I’ll just read the numbers. I’m doing it that crazy way. I think it’s three numbers; it’s really the way Pausanias—I don’t know why they used to do that number thing within the text, do you, why the Greeks did that? But they sure did. (Maud 2010, 61)

Unlike the reading at Goddard the previous year, Olson’s discussion of this poem and the association between a Beat writer—this time Allen Ginsberg—with a Second Sophistic author—here explicitly Pausanias—is actually preempted by Creeley in his reading of Ginsberg. By tracking back through the conversation, we can see precisely what Creeley and Olson are responding to in Ginsberg.

Earlier Olson had recalled how Ginsberg had previously told him that he wanted to go to Laos because he felt that he was not able to trust the media in their reporting of the ongoing Laotian civil war and the US involvement there as part of the Vietnam War. In a letter to his father at this time, Ginsberg wrote that he was upset by what was going on in Laos and the role of the media in reporting on it:

I think more and more, it is not possible to get an accurate picture of local conflicts without absorbing both Western & Communist versions of history,
Olson proceeds to take Ginsberg’s desire to go to Laos as part of his “look-see” version of history. He characterizes Ginsberg as not wanting to “go see a war,” but to merely see: “Is there a war? Was it a war? What is it?” Then, a little later, this idea of the “look-see” is linked to writing poetry. Philip Whalen asks Olson, “Why can’t Ginsberg write about the war even if he hadn’t taken the trouble to go look at it?” In Maud’s transcript, Creeley responds to Whalen’s questions by referring—obliquely—to some of Ginsberg’s recent poetry (collected that same year as *Reality Sandwiches*) and also to Pausanias’s brand of localism:

> These journals [*Reality Sandwiches*] these poems that Allen’s now writing are operating on the very same principle as Pausanias’ walking down the street and seeing what’s there. That’s the way they work. (Maud 2010, 51)

This is the claim, quoted above, that Olson is picking up on at the end of the recorded conversation:

> In the light of what we’ve been talking about, and Robert’s statement that if Allen did what he said he would do it would be like Pausanias, a curious thing happened. There’s a poem which appears in published form as though it was the proof of the proposition. (58)

It is important to note that while Creeley was characterizing Ginsberg’s recent poetry—that collected in *Reality Sandwiches*—Olson is developing an earlier comment about Ginsberg wanting to go to Laos, not to see a war “but just to see: Is there a war? Was it a war? . . . You just want to find out for yourself what really this whole thing amounts to, and the only way you can do it is to go there” (49). This emphasis on Ginsberg as a poet who goes to see places, peoples, and events for himself is present in Ginsberg’s own comments in the back-cover blurb of *Reality Sandwiches*:

> Wake-up nightmares in Lower East Side, musings in public library, across the U.S. in dream auto, drunk in old Havana, brooding in Mayan ruins, sex daydreams on the West Coast, airplane vision of Kansas, lonely in a leafy cottage, lunch hour on Berkeley, beer notations on Skid Row, slinking to Mexico, wrote this last night in Paris, back on Times square dreaming of Times Square, bombed in NY again, loony tunes in the dentist chair, scream-
ing at old poets in South America, aethereal zigzag Poesy in blue hotel room in Peru—a wind-up book of dreams, psalms, journal enigmas & nude minutes from 1953 to 1960 poems scattered in fugitive magazines here collected. (Ginsberg 1963, back cover)

With Ginsberg’s Pausanian journal-poems in mind, I will return to Vancouver and Olson’s own Pausanian poem later in this essay. But first I will offer some general observations about Olson’s Greeks and Beats, and then turn to what I believe to be the “source” of Olson’s associations between the Beats and Pausanias’s localism in a 1959 letter to his friend and editor, Donald Allen, on “post-Beat” poetics for the New American Poetry anthology.

Olson’s Greeks and Beats

Olson’s poetry cannot be reduced to any single “source,” not to the philosophy of Whitehead, nor to the poetry of Pound and certainly not to any classical author. In fact, throughout Olson’s poetic and intellectual writings, the very notion of the Greek and Roman past as valorized by virtue of its “classicality” is strongly resisted. It is within this general stance of resistance, I would claim, that the Greek literature of the Roman Empire attracted Olson nonetheless. In one of his most celebrated early poems, for example, “The Kingfishers,” first published in 1949 and the first poem in Allen’s anthology, Olson begins with the celebrated Heraclitean tag: “What does not change / is the will to change.” Yet by the poem’s third and final section, he writes:

I am no Greek, hath not th’advantage.
And of course, no Roman:
he can take no risk that matters,
the risk of beauty least of all.

Olson (1997a, 92)

8. What Olson means by “advantage” here has somewhat perplexed scholars. Maud cites those who see Olson here taking a middle ground between the Greek and Roman—lower than the former, but above the latter—thus implying that there is some kind of “advantage” to the Greek worldview (1998, 105). Davenport, for example, reads Olson as saying that his culture and language give him scant advantage in speaking as he would like, compared to the Greek (1973–74, 258). Maud’s own interpretation is the opposite. That there is something lacking in the Greek, as much as in Olson’s position, and that both should look “backwards” to Near Eastern texts, elsewhere dubbing himself a “Hittite” and Homer, a “late” European poet. However, more recently Maud admits to changing his mind (2008, 132), agreeing with Davenport and others in seeing “The Kingfishers” as offering “a fairly conventional nod to Greek origins.” Maud’s mistake, as he puts it, was to read Olson’s later work back onto “The Kingfishers,” espe-
The main reference point for “The Kingfishers” and its companion piece “The Praises” is Plutarch’s reading of Heraclitus as quoted by his teacher Ammonius of Athens in Plutarch’s dialogue “The E at Delphi,” a work in which Plutarch attempted to explain the mysterious inscription of the Greek letter “E” that evidently stood in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Olson’s approach to the Greeks here is, as we can see, highly mediated. He paraphrases Heraclitus in the first line of “The Kingfishers,” but he reveals that his source for Heraclitus is Plutarch’s dialogue, and specifically the discourse of Ammonius. The Second Sophistic thus becomes a vital “hinge” for Olson—a means of accessing and mediating the earlier archaic and classical Greeks, while keeping a critical distance from a simplistic valorization of their presumed “advantage.” This idea of “hinge” is explained in the section of his Proprioception called “the hinges (of civilization)” in which Olson describes the second century CE (as it looks back to the first) as an “affective” time:

*the 2nd AD back to the 1st:*

an “affective” time, the 2nd
—as well as brilliant
early secular: Maximus of Tyre
Marinus of Tyre
eamples

but like the 17th later
costly in loss of some—
thing the 1st, as later the
15th & 16th still held, a
sense of the divine

(gain here is to get a load of Gnosticism
& Hans Jonas particularly useful).
(Olson 1997b, 190)

What does Olson mean by this? Here he is again using his reading of Whithead, who focuses on experience as affective rather than cognitive. (In other words we do not perceive the objects in the world before us and then react emotionally, but the reverse—perception is a matter of being affected bodily.)
In short, Plutarch, Maximus, and Pausanias are heroes for Olson because they enact the precise significance that Pausanias gives to the “E” at Delphi—“know thyself”—not merely in terms of its message and meaning, but as an affective process in which we feel and localize the meaning of the inscription of the “E” in our own time, as if to say “this is your time, too.” Furthermore, it was specifically Pausanias and what Olson calls his “careful localism” (in the bibliography to his so-called *Mayan Letters* to Creeley) that enacted this affective process most dramatically. And it was precisely this more careful localism that Olson saw in Pausanias that he invokes in “The Kingfishers” to correct the association Creeley makes between Pausanias and Ginsberg’s historical method in Vancouver (that is, the simplistic conception of Pausanias’s localism as “walking down the street and seeing what’s there”).

Before returning to Vancouver, we may note a significant moment earlier in the confrontation between Olson and the Beats, not in terms of history, but of poetics (fields which, in many ways, Olson would not have considered separate). This was a moment in 1959 when the very issue of categorizing and defining poetic movements, and contemporary “poetics,” was at stake for Olson. I refer to the letters to his friend and editor, Donald Allen at Grove Press, who was compiling the anthology of the “New American Poetry” with which I began this chapter. The immediate context of this exchange involves a series of events in the years 1958–59.

The publication of Kerouac’s *On the Road* and the obscenity trials of Ginsberg’s *Howl*—both in 1957—gave the so-called Beat movement a prominence and notoriety. Tom Clark, in his biography of Olson, writes that Olson “could not suppress in himself a powerful hunger for at least some taste of the wide exposure the Beats were now getting” (2000, 276). Clark continues his account by emphasizing the ambivalent attitude Olson showed to the Beats in how he engaged with their work both at a distance and in person. For example, Olson would copy out into his notebook “long passages from Kerouac’s *On the Road*—despite his misgivings about the naturalistic dimensions of the book” in letters to Robert Creeley (ibid.). The 1959 Harvard appearance of Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky led not only to a notorious incident of Olson headbutting Corso but also a poem called “A Maximus Written to Throw Back a Hex on Allen Ginsberg and/or Gregory Corso,” which, owing to better relations with Ginsberg, he ended up suppressing. But Clark’s recon-

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10. “Pausanias’ *Description of Greece*, more valuable than Plutarch, his immediate predecessor, c. 100 a. d., because of its careful localism, and taking what is said as how to find out for oneself” (Olson 1953, 87).
struction, with its focus on Olson’s reading (for example, of *On the Road*) and anecdotes like the Harvard affair, misses the very fruitful discussion of the direction of what he dubbed the “post-Beat” poetics carried on in Olson’s letters, not only to Donald Allen but also to fellow writer Elaine Feinstein. This discussion of poetics, I would claim, informs Olson’s later characterization of the Beats, and especially Ginsberg, in terms of the Second Sophistic in general, and of Pausanias in particular.

In the “Poetics” section of Allen’s iconic *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, published in 1960, Robert Creeley writes that, “Charles Olson is central to any description of literary ‘climate’ dated 1958” (Allen 1999, 409). Allen’s anthology is a major topic of discussion in the letters of Olson and Allen dating April 1958–May 1960. In these exchanges with Allen, Olson debates the book’s scope and structure (in September 1959), as well as a conception of “post-Beat” poetics that he had outlined earlier. In a letter dated June 17/18, 1958, after a series of apologies for a slow response to an earlier letter, Olson writes, “Actually, its yr book on poetics which starts me now” (Maud 2003, 42). As we discover later, it seems that Allen had asked Olson if he thought the anthology should have a section dedicated to “Poetics” (“So, throw the POETICS in there, I’d say,” [ibid.]). But Olson leads into the poetic discussion by mentioning the copy of John Clellon Holmes’s *roman à clef* about the Beats, *GO* (1952), that Allen had sent him:

> It also sets me going on how much it seems to me the generation gets itself into experience by creating its own aetiology (in the face, god help us, of such shit of the society, they have reason to make up situations—I am thinking of all the habits, rather than such pure and old fashioned Hamlet like Trocchi. (ibid.)

Here Olson is referring to the Scottish novelist and honorary Beat, Alexander Trocchi, whose *Cain’s Book*, published by Allen’s Grove the following year, but presumably read by Olson already, was another *roman à clef*, which he proceeds to contrast with those of Holmes and Jack Kerouac:

> In fact Holmes . . . or Jack for that matter are *happier* in being more arbitrary—cause-wise—than Trocchi, who has to be right. And isn’t, poor guy! My god, it’s wild how wrong he is. (ibid., emphasis in original)

Olson gets back to the issue of poetics by reflecting on the Beat generation represented by Holmes and Kerouac and how they were
much more displayed, splayed, searching and whatever—just because, I'm thinking, the whole show is set off from the self-made cause. . . . Wow: I mean is there any better example of setting up the all which follows? Which gets me back to the future of poetics. That is: despite what I say, the fact is, whichever way you take the generation, they lead on to the next thing. (ibid.)

Finally Olson offers his impression as to what the next thing will actually be:

IMAGE. And PUN (these are the two big problems of post-beat: the real hides in art on those: the image, which equals the object (whatever the damned object is) & the noun-rhyme, which trips the blast off. (ibid., 43, emphasis in original)

This he summarizes in terms of a trajectory from the “open field” of “Projective Verse” via Beat response to the present issue:

(1) the open field leads to the narrowest gate

(2) sd gate is where the squeeze beat talks is for real

(3) “poetics,” at sd point, is most serious, and if technical, suddenly drops to, almost, like they say, who do our living for us. (ibid., 44)

Olson appears here to be saying that the “post-Beat” poetics is one that rewrites Beat claims to poetic Truth in the form of the IMAGE (one stage removed from reality as in any proximate object to which there is a flow of feeling) and the PUN (the poetic inscription of the IMAGE, which is three stages removed from reality). But what has any of this to do with the Beats, let alone the Second Sophistic? We can see the “move” made in the Allen letter, from the novels that depict the Beat movement of Holmes, Kerouac, and, to a much lesser extent, Trocchi, to this “post-Beat” poetics of image and pun. The same “move” is made in Olson's “Letter to Elaine Feinstein,” which Allen would end up including in the anthology. Here is the same vatic passage quoted earlier in this essay (see above, 254):

Nothing was happening as of the poem itself—ding and zing or something. It was referential to reality. And that a p[iss] poor crawling actuarial “real”—good enough to keep banks and insurance companies, plus mediocre governments. But not Poetry's Truth like my friends from the American Underground [aka the Beats] cry and spit in the face of “Time.”
The Image also has to be taken by a double: that is, if you bisect a parabola you get an enantiomorph (The Hopi say what goes on over there isn’t happening here therefore it isn’t the same: pure “localism” of space-time, but such localism can now be called: what you find out for yrself (‘istorin) keeps all accompanying circumstance. ( Olson 1997b, 251)

The complexities of Olson’s poetics are worth exploring in themselves, but more relevant for our purposes here is his observation that the Beats represent a pivotal moment in the history of poetry, and that the reference to “pure localism” as keeping “all accompanying circumstance” is not only a gloss contrasting Pausanias to Herodotus but also Olson to the Beats. For Olson, the next step beyond the Beats’ poetics of “Truth” and their crying and spitting in the face of “Time” must be the punning union of a time and place with an image. In the “Letter to Elaine Feinstein,” he will call it “tope/type/trope.” The Beat poetics of verbal and emotional spontaneity, mixed with seeing for oneself, finding out for yourself, must first be accompanied by the deeper truth of temporal and spatial “circumstance”: that is the real. In addition, language and the proper name are loaded images, not only the personal images of the Beats but also the historical images of ancient time and place.

**Pausanias, Olson and Localism**

Olson’s poem as proof “Book 2, chapter 37,” read at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963 to make his point about history, does more than insert his Gloucester into Pausanias’s Lerna; it engages with Pausanias’s localist project in a way that is close to the role played by Plutarch in “The Kingfishers,” which is an interpretive, intermediary role. To demonstrate this point, we may compare Olson’s poem with Pausanias’s text, which he read in Frazer’s translation (2.37):

1. Beginning at this mountain, the grove, which consists mostly of plane-trees, reaches down to the sea. It is bounded on the one side by the river Pontinus, and on the other side by another river, called Amymone, after the daughter of Danaus. 2. In the grove are images of Demeter, surnamed Prosymne, and of Dionysus: there is also a small seated image of Demeter. These images 2. are made of stone. In another temple there is a seated wooden image of Saviour Dionysus. There is also a stone image of Aphrodite beside the sea. They say that it was dedicated by the daughters of Danaus, and that Danaus himself made the sanctuary of Athena on the banks of the Pontinus.
3. The Lernaean mysteries are said to have been instituted by Philammon. The stories told about the rites are clearly not ancient. Other stories, I am told, purporting to be 3. by Philammon, have been found engraved on a piece of copper fashioned in the shape of a heart. But these stories also have been proved not to be by Philammon. (Frazer 1913, 129)

In both Gloucester and Lerna, there are “recent” or “new” additions to the rituals and site: the worship of the Lernian Mysteries “is proved to be recent” while some tablets of Poseidon “written on copper in the shape of a heart/ prove to be likewise new.” In Pausanias, there are stories about the rites—claimed to be by their founder, Philammon, but judged by Pausanias to be “clearly not ancient.” Yet, as Pausanias goes on to record in 37.3, other stories engraved on a heart of copper, said to be by Philammon as well, were proven by one Arrhiphon to be of a later date—of Pausanias’s day. Arrhipron’s argument is simply that Philammon lived before the Doric Invasion (which would have introduced the Doric dialect into Greece), while the stories purported to have been written by him are in the Doric dialect.

If we made a pilgrimage to Olson’s Gloucester, we would find numerous historical plaques set up there as well, although they are bronze and rectangular, not heart-shaped copper. In fact, Olson wrote a Maximus poem about these very plaques (2.174). The crucial point here is that Olson’s Pausanian poem, as recited amid the characterisation of Beats—Kerouac in Goddard and Ginsberg in Vancouver—generates its expression of localism—of Lerna and Gloucester—in terms of a “post-Beat” poetics of image and pun. The image is manifested in the way that Pausanias encountering Lerna mirrors Olson (as Maximus) in Gloucester; but the Pun is located in the proper name as found in the plaques—both the specificity or localism of each inscription and their crossing of time and space. These plaques may look old, but they are actually new and set up to act as mediators for the past in the present at the same place. In fact, through the realization that these plaques are Pausanias’s tablets, and, by extension, Gloucester is Lerna, Olson literally enacts his “post-Beat” poetics of image and pun; of tope/type/trope, as place (Lerna/Gloucester), its “attending circumstance” of language (plaques/tablets) and the image generated in the recognition of a localized, yet global, history. Indeed, classical scholars share the vision of Pausanias out of which Olson generated his “post-Beat” poetics, highlighting the “complex articulation of a cultural identity” in his work, with “the local and the global in constant and productive tension,” and noting the “juxtaposition of the very distant past with the more recent past,” as well as Pausanias’s roles “as observer, evaluator and commentator” (Goldhill 2010, 67).
With the example of Pausanias at the forefront of Olson’s Second Sophistic, we see Plutarch, and Maximus of Tyre as well, as more than just “sources” or ways for him to escape the “Western box,” but as figures through whom to articulate a poetics of localism that is at one and the same time heavily contingent on the Beats but also importantly distinct from them. It is only through the dynamic between Olson and the Beats, especially Ginsberg, in their formulations of poetics and history, that the full force of Olson’s engagement with a particularly key moment in classical antiquity (the Second Sophistic) can be understood.

Bibliography


