

ROBERT MCTAVISH / Undone Business: Charles Bernstein on the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference

The Vancouver Poetry Conference, a three-week program of discussions, workshops, lectures, and readings in the summer of 1963, featured visiting US poet-instructors Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Charles Olson, and sparked dialogue about “New American” innovative, open form poetics. The following interview is one of many that filmmaker Robert McTavish conducted in preparation for the film The Line has Shattered: Vancouver’s Landmark 1963 Poetry Conference (Non-Inferno Media 2013), which marks the 50th anniversary of the conference.

ROBERT MCTAVISH: You’ve got the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference recordings on the PennSound site. Does it have a profile, to people here in America?

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: America! Sure, I mean, I think those interested in the New American Poetry know about the Vancouver conference. Don Allen’s anthology, *The New American Poetry*, came out just three years before the Vancouver conference. Famously, for those few for whom anything about poetry can be famous!, the anthology included different configurations of poets: the Beats, which would have included Ginsberg and Kerouac and Burroughs, who were represented at the conference by Ginsberg; the so-called Black Mountain Poets, which would have been Creeley and Olson, two very different poets but affiliated; and the San Francisco Renaissance, which would have been Duncan at the conference but also Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, and Whalen too. Vancouver ’63 and Berkeley ’65 are milestones in the history of the New American Poetry. It’s also very important to me as somebody who was in Canada early on in my life and had a deep connection to Canadian poets and also who has a great interest in, and knowledge of, the relationship between the US and Canadian poets. Seen the other way around, of course, the Vancouver conference was pivotal to the reception of US poetry within Canada through the TISH group. It’s a crucial point of contact. From

a US point of view its significance is more tenuous, but it is one of the key events of New American Poetry, along with the Berkeley conference, Black Mountain College, the first reading of "Howl" in San Francisco, and the like. It's fascinating that these poets came together in Vancouver when they were so young and relatively unknown. A number of interesting Canadian poets came to the conference and as far as US poets go, it was important for Michael Palmer and Clark Coolidge, which makes it important for those of us who greatly admire their work. Coolidge and Palmer connected up to the New American Poetry in a more visceral way through that conference and remained connected to it throughout their lives, though I don't have much evidence that they connected up to Canadian poetry.

RM: What about Denise Levertov?

CB: In the Allen anthology Denise Levertov is grouped with Black Mountain. Such groupings are always problematic—but the anthology is so emblematic of the Vancouver Conference, that from our present vantage, the two can't easily be separated. Levertov was a poet connected to Creeley and Duncan at the time but who later turned hostile to the aesthetics that were articulated in Vancouver, at least as I understand those aesthetics. You can see her work in '63 as especially connected to Creeley's short line. But I think she came to resist what Robin Blaser talks about in "The Violets": she's a poet who turned much more reverential to traditional ideas of meaning and craft and subject and was suspicious of approaches to poetry that veered from that. A wonderful poet in the early books, because of that tension; very often poetry becomes more interesting when there's a tension, where the poet feels in conflict with the poetics that inform the community of which she is part. In any case, that was a good moment for Levertov's work and she was a powerful presence at the time. But you raise an interesting issue when you mention Levertov, which is the absence of women at the Vancouver conference and in the *New American Poetry* anthology. Somebody who teaches that work always has to confront that issue: that while one could look for other women of the period who were not included, and try to add them in retrospect, the fact is that those groupings of poets I mentioned were not very open or supportive of

women poets. You can't rewrite that history. Doesn't mean those poets weren't great poets: they were. Doesn't mean their attitudes toward women were any different than their contemporaries in the society at large: they weren't. And it should be addressed but it can't be redressed by saying there are other people related who can be airbrushed in, because one fundamental fact was that it was a boy's club, or several boy's clubs. There were women writing at that time who were not included who were doing other crucial work, as we can see with the benefit of feminism and hindsight. Men like me have benefited from that: I have the advantage that the problems with that male culture have been vehemently pointed out to me in a way that they weren't to my elders and I picked up a little of that even if my unconscious was not as cooperative as my conscious; anyway, I had to. There but for grace of feminism go I!

RM: So does the conference grouping make sense?

CB: Sure. The map provided by the *New American Poetry* holds up, although, in hindsight, I would have an expanded map. Hindsight is always 20 percent utopian, 20 percent holier than thou, and 60 percent ahistorical. So I'm not going to mention a whole bunch of names for your film because I don't think that really does justice to what happened in Vancouver. But let's just say that a full understanding of the Vancouver conference requires a larger contextual field for 1963. That goes without saying, but I am saying it anyway. The group was prescient: these are poets who remain profoundly important in North America. One thing that is valuable is that we can switch to the words North American as opposed to the US when we speak of the poets who were there because they had an impact that was across the border between the two countries. That stands out. There were other poets at that time who represented other kinds of aesthetics and Vancouver presented only a slice, albeit a big one, of the New American Poetry. Certainly the poets at the conference remain among the most remarkable poets of the post-war period.

RM: These guys in '63 are still marginal figures. Were these radical poets?

CB: I think they were and are. Considering the rise of the counter-culture and the left in the 60s, these poets hold up as a very important counterforce.

They're not really marginal, in the literary history I subscribe to (and I've got a lifetime, charter subscription), yet they've been marginalized, they were excluded, they were detested, for a number of reasons, different reasons in different cases. Allen Ginsberg became the most famous American poet in the period after the Second World War, so it's hard to make a case that he's marginalized. Still, when I was growing up you wouldn't see reviews and commentaries in the nationally-circulated publications that constituted Official Verse Culture, such as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, or *The Saturday Review* (which I subscribed to as a teenager). I remember seeing Ginsberg on a local TV talk show hosted by the right-winger Alan Burke around 1966; Ginsberg was presented as a specimen of perversion: he immediately became a local hero. It's a good lesson to recall that the hostile response to poetry can actually be its best advertisement; it worked that way for me. The exclusion from the mainstream made the mainstream seem so, well, square.

But, you know, *For Love*, Robert Creeley's book, sold a lot of copies, as did *Howl*. Still, these poets really were an alternative to the more officially-sanctioned poets of the time, whether Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman, or Richard Wilbur (in this best of all possible worlds). And yet I think also of two really fantastic poets, one a little bit younger than the Vancouver conference poets, and one the same age: Sylvia Plath, who's often associated with confessionalism, but who has her own place of honor in the world of readers, and Adrienne Rich. So it's not a matter of the raw and the cooked being synonymous with good and bad. But that doesn't change the facts on the ground: *Howl* was considered the work of a barbarian, a barbaric yawp in the Whitman sense, as Louis Simpson wrote in *The New York Times*. And Creeley's breaking down the pre-packaged conception of a poem. Creeley's work, especially in the early 60s when he moves from *For Love* to the very radical works *Words*, and *Pieces*—are these even poems (some asked at the time)? Turns out the ones yelling "philistine!" were the philistines just like the ones yelling Communist were not patriots. (But that's not a very mature attitude to call those calling you names by those names. Maybe I really am a 60s guy.)

Olson's "Projective Verse" is probably the most influential essay written in the US after the war—1950—again not something that emerges in the Cold War-friendly world of the nationally-circulated magazines, but it'd be hard to think of anything that had more of an influence on American poetry than that essay. Or Olson's "The Kingfishers," from 1949, the kind of inaugural poem you might say of post-war American poetry looking back to the Second World War, to the systematic extermination of the European Jews and the bombing at Hiroshima, which still in '63 is the shadow that these poets are contending with. What Jack Spicer calls the "human crisis" ("I Can- / not / accord / sympathy / to / those / who / do / not / recognize / The human crisis"—*Language*). How do poets respond to the human crisis? And that's why the work really holds up—because these poets really were responding to the human crisis.

RM: Linda Wagner-Martin says that when Creeley came out and said "you don't have to write a good poem anymore" . . .

CB: Still fightin' words! Creeley was contesting the narrow parameters of what was acceptable as a good poem—the overwrought urn—and the need to contest that is no less great now than then. The first pushback is to say the new stuff is just "bad," plain and simple—awkward, lacking form, without rhyme or reason. And then when that argument loses force as its sheer mediocrity is exposed, the line changes to: well, we always appreciated *that* innovation and besides what's so new about that anyway; that approach to poetry is old hat and, if anything, so widely accepted as to be merely a fading fashion. But then, this *new* stuff by the younger poets, that really is junk. With some key exceptions, like Creeley or Ginsberg or Ashbery, whose work is just too compelling and has too much support on the poetry street to exclude from Official Verse Culture, it's not outlaw to classic but outlaw to outmoded, forgotten, pushed aside. (Yes, that is a joke about the poetry street. Sort of.)

I mean—am I a radical poet because I have a good job at an Ivy League university now? Am I a radical poet or am I in the mainstream? It depends on how you want to look at it. A lot of what people think are the most radical things that I say, Gertrude Stein might have said 100 years ago but they're still not accepted within the mainstream culture. So these guys are radical

by putting forward, to some degree, views that were put forward, as Creeley would be the first to say, by Zukofsky, by Williams, by Stein, the radical modernists or second-wave modernists who weren't being taught much either in '63, not to mention Blake or Swinburne, Poe, Dickinson. Which is not to deny the specificity of their work that is not anticipated by their forebears, but to get to that specificity you have to push through a lot of die-hard anti-modernist attitude. (Official Verse Culture has an attitude problem.)

The famous remark by Pound that poetry is news that stays news is a troubling thing because it shouldn't be news: we should accept, by now, that this is what poetry does. But the fact that poetry (the kind of poetry I want) remains constantly a shock is one of the great powers of poetry and it's because of the general resistance to questioning the symbolic norms of verbal language: the way that the law operates, newspapers, journalism, expository writing, which are taken to be natural truths, related to truth, coherence, reality. And Charles Olson gives that talk and says No! to that view about the relation of language to exposition: to topic sentence, development, conclusion, to rationalized thought. Rationalization is not the same as reason, and rationalization is part of the crisis of civilization that leads to the Second World War. Techno-rationality is part of this crisis, in 1938 or 1963 or 1968. That is *radical* sure, because it goes to the root. But the necessity of responding to what Spicer called "the human crisis" is a very old problem for poetry, and it has to be made new, renewed. And that makes for difficulties.

There's this ridiculous article in *The New York Times* [October 2009] I posted recently on the web, in which psychologists say that reading nonsense, which is to say anything that's slightly difficult, actually proves to be educationally useful, "but we need to do further studies"! It's like saying "yes, having students think might help their education rather than rote learning," but we have to do further study. So is anything that's not rote learning radical? But this is what—I'm sort of miming what Olson says in his lecture in Vancouver—if that is radical it really suggests how conservative the views are that surround our verbal culture.

Olson of all those poets is the one whose approach can be characterized as anti-hegemonic, hegemony being the idea of Antonio Gramsci, the great

Italian communist, that it's not just that power is controlled by who owns the factories, but it's controlled by what kind of ideas are acceptable. Hegemony is that which controls the way we think, kind of like the brainwashing of the 50s. This '63 conference is a Cold War conference that's talking about issues, not in the terms of socialism perhaps, but is an aesthetic declaration of independence from the Cold War, in Canada, in North America, a declaration of independence from crippling ideology of the Cold War, in its 1963 version.

Olson in particular in the early sections of *The Maximus*, in "The Kingfishers," in "Projective Verse," is writing anti-hegemonic poetry. He's writing a poetry that's declarative, that's a pose—that's why it's so grand, so loud, so bombastic, so pompous. He's trying to break through the rule by "pejorocracy," rule by the worst (but I always hear that Pound coinage as also being "perjurocracy," my own neologism for rule by those who violate the public trust). Olson is trying to puncture the wall of systematic mendacity (to use Big Daddy's words) that is represented by the emergence of advertising and consumer culture, which in '63 is a very powerful social critique: "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?" ("I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You"). So he's seeing that and he's trying to present some kind of counterforce by saying: let's look outside of the accepted, even classics, of the Western tradition. Let's look at things from indigenous cultures (the Mayans), at thinking before Plato (Heraclitus); let's look at the local where we are, Gloucester. His form of cultural/political radicalism resonates with '68: that we're not just going to sit down and take this anymore, that learning inside the Western box is not really helping us to learn. Ironically, the expression "we have to think out of the box" is now used mostly by marketing executives and junk bond pushers. But, of course, Olson was speaking at a time of the man in the gray flannel suit and the New Critics, with the bomb and the death camps casting a shadow over postwar American happiness-through-conformity. Robin Blaser lays it all out in "The Violets," his wonderful essay on Olson's critique of the limits of "the Western box" <writing.upenn.edu/library/Blaser-Robin_The-Violets.html>.

The polemic of these poets is not important as a polemic against mainstream poetry or some imagination of traditional poetry; it's not against people who write poems about landscape. (There's nothing wrong with such work per se and great poems can emerge, even out of the subject of a dark night in Yellowknife, a topic I hope to take up at some future time, before my memories are put out to pasture.) Often we get baited into that critique, me too, because at the time such poetry is put forward at the only legitimate poetry and that ain't so and never was. The polemic, the radicalness, has to do with the problem of America, American culture, American capitalism, the impact of the Second War on Western society. It really doesn't matter that it's for or against some particular local issue within poetry, except insofar that it is symbolic of larger cultural struggles that are being considered by these poets.

RM: Creeley mentions you can't make a poem like a cup.

CB: "The Well-Wrought Urn." He's targeting Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. But there's no poet who writes with greater craft and beauty, as we look back on it, than Robert Creeley. Olson was more smashing the vessels and not replacing them with beautiful artifacts. With Creeley, even in the poems where he breaks lines down into small word clusters, each of these clusters is beautiful and crystalline. Part of the problem is the conception—now as then—of what constitutes craft or a good poem: diehard ideas about poetry that are extolled by the mediocracy, by people who put forward the mediocre and the received as being the highest possible value. So when you actually do something which creates poetic value, which if you're interested in Creeley's poetry you can plainly see he's doing, it's missed. The claims to honor beauty, craft, meaning, and the tradition of poetry so often end up as a travesty because it is just those things that are reviled by Official Verse Culture (then and now). I think Creeley in retrospect holds up a new kind of craft, a new kind of form and shape and verbal economy, that's also quite different from his immediate company. Creeley's perceived radicalism was exacerbated by the resistance to the emerging forms that he and others were inventing (as is so often the case).

RM: You mention Olsonian influence on '68 . . .

CB: I'm not saying that there's a causal connection with somebody reading Charles Olson and the free speech movement of '66, although there probably is that, but rather that he's part of a popular cultural moment that we see emerging in the late 60s.

RM: Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote that "Projective Verse" was the most important essay to contemporary poetry.

CB: "Projective Verse" was one of the most significant works of poetics coming from the immediate post-war period in the US. Or to put it in another way, "Projective Verse" was greatly influential to poets younger than Olson in the 1950s and 1960s. To what degree it's been influential after the 60s is open to question, but those poets who were influenced by it remained a powerful force for decades. The manifesto offered a way to understand a poetry that was aversive to metrical poetry and received forms—a poetry that emphasizes the body, speaking rhythms, intuition, and the flow of perception, rather than emphasizing unity and closure, proper diction, traditional ideas of aesthetic beauty, balance, literary conceits, literary allusion, traditional conceptions of depth, profundity, and wisdom, all of which would have been the criteria for a good poem in 1963. Of course now we think of urns as places for the ashes of the dead. Yet, I want to also say that New Critical attention to the poem as artifice is something admirable and still offers a necessary counter-measure to the idea of the poem as an unmediated expression or message. At the same time, "Projective Verse" argued for a political poetry that was unlike the social realist poetry of the 30s and 40s and would have been troubling to poets committed to a political oppositionality that was populist and accessible. Interesting, in this respect, to contrast Olson with his near-contemporary Dorothy Livesay. If you put "The Kingfishers" on the radio or television, which it would never be, or even if you put it in your documentary, people wouldn't understand exactly what it was against, whereas they would if you had a poem that said we've got to get out of Korea, or, in '63, "we have no business going into Vietnam." Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov had a big falling out over the Vietnam War poetry.

RM: Do you think “Projective Verse” is understood differently now, in today’s context?

CB: “Projective Verse” gave permission—“first permission,” as Robert Duncan says in “Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” a poem published just a few years before the Vancouver conference. And it was also a permission against aspects even of radical modernism, which would have seemed more uptight, more involved with intricacy of form. And, you know, as with any galvanizing force, it also becomes a force to contest, to push back against, even within poetry’s alternative and innovative circles. I’ve certainly put my pataque(e)rical shoulder to that wheel (“for God’s sake look out where you’re going”). “Projective Verse” opened the way for composition by field, which connects to Duncan’s *The Opening of the Field* (1960): the field also being that sense of a magnetic field, a scientific field, a field of operation, a multidimensional field of simultaneous events, the field of history—the many different senses that Duncan brings into the field. In “Often I am Permitted,” the first poem in that book, the meadow is the field but for Duncan the meadow is also something archaic or ancient or biblical—mythopoetic. Then again, mythopoetics is quite different from what we might otherwise associate with Olson’s field. And in some absolutely quotidian sense, composition by field in its best sense in Olson is an artifact of the typewriter. The field had a compositional space created by the 8½" × 11" page, the overall layout. Larry Eigner would be the exemplary poet of the manual typewriter: the force of each letter as it smashes into the white page, using the visual space of the page, organizing the lines on the page overall, averting a flush left format. The influence of this page design is something distinct from other aspects of “Projective Verse”; Kathleen Fraser takes up the influence in an essay, and you can see the connection to Susan Howe.

But composition by field also foments (unconsciously?!) dissociation—not one perception following upon another but, as I say in “Introjective Verse,” a work that I wrote which inverts all the terms of “Projective Verse”—one thought should *never* follow upon another. So you could take the opposite view and you would still get something that was related to composition by field: you could have disjunction, gaps, jumping. So there are inherent

possibilities of opening the field that go against the explicit manifesto, that are unanticipated. And that is all for the good for any manifesto. Breath, following your train of thought (one perception must directly lead to another), is a little bit like Ginsberg's "first thought best thought." I don't think that is the way Olson composed, and the spontaneity/breath thing, well, that does not bear well under too much scrutiny. The concept of breath is exhilarating in Olson, but also problematic: I don't think that it's what's galvanizing, what gives permission. Breath is much too organic a metaphor for textual composition. Many of us have made that point, Steve McCaffery early on. On poem as field, Creeley's wonderful—the poem is the field of what happens. You're writing and something happens, and then you can include that sudden emergence, that disjunction. It doesn't have to fit into some previous pattern; it makes the pattern as it merrily or un-merrily goes along. Think also of Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" from 1959, which, in its advocacy of the informal and satiric is a perfect antidote to the heaviness and quasi-grandiloquence of Olson (which I enjoy).

I think poetry takes on greater value when we think about it in its historically-specific context rather than as generalized principles that can apply for all time. So I would say those ideas that remain current and fresh and powerful in the work of the New American Poets in the 50s and 60s are carried on in a new way for those who are able to take them and transform them in their present: the insistence on social materiality, the resistance to Cold War ideology. Still, keeping in mind the historical moment, the way Olson casts his work as a man talking to other men embodies a very masculine idea of the heroic. The striding that elides introversion, falling, stumbling, dissociation, which are also fundamental to the opening of the field, I think mark any revisionism that stays fully engaged with Olson's thoughts. It does a disservice to Olson's thought to reference only the most clichéd or masculinist aspects of what he was putting forward, and to see his work solely in terms of things that he was trapped inside of, along with so many others of this time. I am not looking for poets to be prophets, who are able to transcend the limits we are inside of, but to be whistleblowers. Whistleblowers of the uncharted. I am all

for tradition in poetry, though I call it an echoic poetics. But so much depends on *what* tradition, what echo.

RM: “The line has shattered.” Why would Olson say that?

CB: I love that: “shattered” is better than “breath.” Verbal language is very much related to speech, but language is infected by a wide range of non-speech-oriented textualities. At this late date, to say this is a little like whispering “God is dead.” Have you heard? A speech-centered poetics runs the risk of being politically and aesthetically conservative, especially if it is wedded to a sense that speech is natural and authentic. Levertov’s move to an aesthetic (but not political) right would be a case in point. The one time I met her, in 1984 in Alabama, out of the blue and without so much as a how do you do, she told me my work offended her because it was an abuse against nature, as if constructing a novel syntactic pattern was like vandalizing a forest. Olson’s “shattered” is breath of fresh air because it suggests multiple incommensurable discourses, which I do think is where Olson was going with “Projective Verse.”

My favorite essay of Olson’s, though, is “Proprioception,” which is a magnificent essay in which he abandons many of the ideas of the earlier manifesto and talks about moving in a spatial context, in a four-dimensional field. The other thing would be to talk about *Call Me Ishmael* in terms of Olson and space: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy” (as he begins *Call Me Ishmael*). But insofar as space is something to be inhabited—I don’t mean to say this against Olson, I mean to say this against people who would sentimentalize Olson, and take space and breath as pristine—space, when Canadians and Americans moved to the west, was not a wilderness, was not uninhabited. It was the force of Capitalism that was the wind at our backs and that movement involved a genocide. So when we’re opening up a “new” space where we can speak freely, leaving Europe behind us, it’s good to acknowledge whose fields we are speaking in and who else, unheard, is present. And who we recognize as even being human in those fields and that space. So I think for a lot of us, that space in the American

field, in Manifest Destiny expansion, is troubling just in the way that Herman Melville deals with it in *Moby Dick*, as discussed in *Call Me Ishmael*.

To think of shattering allows for multiple incommensurable discourses—and by that I mean discourses that do not connect up, that can't be totalized, that can't be put together in a total body. Because bodies are shattered just as much as lines and lives. If the line is shattered, the individual lyric voice is shattered. If the individual lyric voice is shattered, then you don't have this obsession with speaking from a body as if it's a separate, discrete thing (cut off from the body politic, polis). The "lyrical interference of the individual as ego," as Olson says in "Projective Verse." And certainly Whalen in his Zen Buddhism was creating a non-ego-centered poetry. So I think the shattering, the scattering, the opening up of incommensurable possibilities for form is an important legacy of New American Poetry, understood as fomenting formally innovative processes. If it's understood as just being guys getting together who can finally speak freely and really express themselves in their sexually liberated bodies, then I think it's lost its power and force.

RM: Another take: maybe he's touching on the canon and what you can say. Another idea: the end of progress, the line of progress.

CB: Olson's critique of Western metaphysics turned a panoptical spotlight on teleology. I think that that is true to some degree of the other Vancouver conference poets as well, but it is also another way of talking about process as opposed to product. Or Emerson's moral perfectionism—that we're on the way somewhere but we don't actually get there. It's the journey not the finish line. But I think this is what I started to say about Olson and World War II in the beginning: the work of Olson and others of his generation shattered the conception that technological progress was occurring, that human beings were evolving in some positive way. The catastrophe of 1938–45 made painfully apparent, to those willing to look, that there is a virus hidden deep within our enlightenment thought, to use the William Burroughs' image. Rationality and representation are not innocent bystanders to the dystopian events of the Second World War. The final solution was an instrument of technology; the death camps operated with enormous efficiency and rationality. The atomic

bomb was an instrument of technology and the product of scientific progress. The Cold War, the immediate context in 1963 and a fundamental frame for reading the work coming out of the Vancouver conference, is not just a matter of containing Communism; the shadow of the systematic extermination process hangs over it as much as the mushroom cloud.

On the canon, there is Olson's "What does not change / is the will to change" in "The Kingfishers": the canon is something that gets made against the grain of convention. After all, this was the time when "nonconformist" had yet to become a marketing tool for jeans. And yes, that means that the New American Poetry is a provisional canon and that the poetry after that needed to resist and transform it to be truthful to its spirit. What is hard to do in retrospect is to remember how discomforting this work was to the Official Verse Culture of 1963, in Canada, say at UBC, or in the US. But that discomfort is an important part of the social work of this poetry, and other dissident poetry: its later (relative) acceptance doesn't take that away. What remains inspiring about these poets is that they do not put forward the idea that you have to pay obeisance to the forms, the styles, the modes, and the rhetorics of literary tradition (including modernism). The real (or let's just say imaginary, unreal) tradition, the deeper one, is fueled by profound disagreement, a conviction that forms needed to change to meet new circumstances. So the honor that we can pay to our poetic forebears is to try to search for our own meanings and our own forms, not to use the forms that they had 40, 50, 60 years ago, as if that's somehow the model that's going to answer our problems now. That doesn't make this work outmoded, or passé: it's the very heart of its relevance.

RM: You yourself said of "The Kingfishers: "we are not one, but many, and of the many threads our story woven." <<http://sibila.com.br/english/a-note-on-charles-olson-the-kingfishers-for-arkaddis-dragomoschenkos-translation/3099>>

CB: That sense of the pluriverse, multiplicity, so beautifully articulated, especially in Robin Blaser's essays . . .

RM: You've said since the 50s readings are among the most important sites for the work. How?

CB: In the postwar period, poets increasingly gathered to share work in cafés, bars, and community and art centers, as well as at universities. Such gatherings have become a primary place for the exchange of poetic work and for the formation of poetry communities. PennSound, the archive I started with Al Filreis, allows a fuller access to poetry's audio track—and it's not a coincidence that the key Vancouver participants are at the heart of our collection, including Fred Wah's recordings from 1963. With Creeley or Ginsberg or Olson (or Barbara Guest or Hannah Weiner or Amiri Baraka), you really can't get the new prosody being invented without hearing it performed. After that, what is on the page becomes a score of a different kind. Because it's not entirely an alphabetic script that gives you the full rhythmic dimension of what's going on. Alphabetic texts work fine if you are relying on an idealized metrical form such as iambic pentameter. But when you have a prosody that is modeled on Thelonious Monk, where syncopation or off beats is the name of the game, well, you need to hear it to get it. But I would say that the important aspect that you hear in Creeley and in Olson or Weiner isn't the individual voice but rather voices and voicing, the use of the human voice as an instrument for sounding. Voicing is a fundamentally prosodic intervention more than an attempt to represent a poet's own voice, though this distinction is so finely sutured in Creeley and Olson as to seem to disappear. And after all, the sound patterning becomes the voice of the poet. In any case, this really is a break from the idea of voice in Robert Lowell or John Berryman or Elizabeth Bishop. Voicing in Olson, Creeley, Whalen, or Weiner is a much more destabilizing, non-ego or -person-centered activity that can't be read in the way that conventional mid-century lyric poetry can, as the outer utterance of an individual's interior life. For Whalen, it's all about charting the flow of perception, not projecting a voice. Which is not to say you don't get glimpses of the poet's inner life, but it's not the one tamed on Miltown. And there's been a sea change in the distinction between inner and outer. So much depends upon sound patterning that is not expected. It's being created, as Olson says in "I, Maximus of Gloucester to You": "by ear"! "By ear, he sd," not voice. Going

by ear: following intuition and perception and allowing jumps and discontinuities—roughhewn rather than clean, asymmetrical rather than its obverses. There's where you could see how Creeley seems to pick up on Olson even though Creeley as a poet seems the most diametrically opposite of Olson in his work: contained and small-scale rather than projective and grand-scale.

RM: So does this hook up with Whitehead, with the poem as event?

CB: The field is the n-dimensional space of the plural event of the poem. The event electrifies the field; it is the momentum the movement, of the activity in which the poem comes into being. Enactment rather than representation. Making actual rather than reifying.

RM: Coolidge said that Creeley reading added emotion. Olson was a showman.

CB: Olson sounds more like somebody making a speech to the Democratic National Convention than other poets. I wish such a speech had been made to the DNC! A broad address—a public address, inflammatory, prophetic, and condemnatory. With Creeley you do have that extraordinarily powerful use of the disjunction or displacement, especially in his early readings, which signifies anguish. So line to line you have an abstract dislocation as a formal device, which, when you hear it in performance and then later when you read it yourself, when you dig it, as Bob would say, it seems to be a voice breaking up because of an overflow of emotion. So that's a very remarkable aspect of Creeley's work, that it has those two things going on at once like quantum physics—particle and wave at the same time.

RM: Having these recordings from the 1963 conference: is that one of its important legacies?

CB: The history of poetry is not just a print history. The audio versions of poems are as much realizations of the poems as is the print. So insofar as we have those recordings and can listen to them it opens up primary, not secondary, dimensions of the work. The particular readings in Vancouver weren't necessarily different from other readings the poets gave; we have recordings

of all those poets outside of Vancouver so it's not the Rosetta Stone. Still, the primary value of the Vancouver Conference was the impact it had on the Canadian poets present. And that high-impact connection between Canadian and American poets has remained all too rare.

RM: Is it fair to say an event like this can have resonance?

CB: No question. We can still hear the echo, just as our talking about and your work on the film amplifies or relays the echo. Imagine the n-dimensional field of poetics as, to use Duchamp's phrase, a "network of stoppages." Think of a map with different points on it that are asymmetric, that don't create a discernable figure. Vancouver '63 is a key "stoppage" on that map. A focal point. All the more important because for a movement to recognize itself it needs to get outside the myopic context of its own place: and what could be more myopic than US culture at that time (well, maybe except US culture at this time). Vancouver provides a crucial dialectical space, a way of decentering the movement. But for Canadian poetry the issue is quite different. This was a moment when some Canadian poets overcame a necessary and foundational resistance to the US. And I think there's a lot of heat that the TISH people took for being open to the US at this moment. But what they were inspired by, and what Vancouver represents, is not just about these particular poets. These poets were also part of a much larger cultural phenomenon. They happened to be the people who were there at that time and there was some fantastic curating going on because they are wonderful poets who are very inspiring. But they are part of a larger group of poets and artists and cultural thinkers, on both sides of the border. Perhaps we could call it our North American poetry Woodstock, five years before the music event. (Woodstock I did get to go to, with Susan Bee—and quickly left: too much mud.) Vancouver '63 remains powerful for us because it is metonymic. Such cathected points of contact are surprisingly infrequent in the history of US and Canadian poetry, which is so odd for countries that are so closely aligned as ours. Frank Davey, in his article for *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of American Poets and Poetry*, has written about the infrequency of significant contact between US poets and Canadian poets. After all, America is very insular and xenophobic about

other countries including Canada, and Canadians have had to respond to that US self-absorption. So this conference was important from that point of view. I would emphasize that aspect as a moment of contact which opened up aspects of US culture to Canadian poetry and poetics way beyond the few people that were invited. However, it had a very limited effect of opening up Canadian poetry to the US because of the enormous insularity of American culture, including American poetry culture. The significance of the event was not reciprocal and, after all, there was not a comparable event of Canadian poets in the US.

RM: So a fermentation of a transnational poetics . . .

CB: If somebody said that, I would hope anybody interested would say “this is the exact problem with Americans, they think transnationalism is a one-way street.” So I want to make clear if it’s a one-way street then it’s a very problematic transnationalism. And it doesn’t mean that it isn’t significant, it doesn’t mean that those poets are in any way responsible for it, but if you want to talk about it that way, it’s important to note that. And we’re trying to see what can be done to promote something that can be an exchange across national lines and I think the web has finally eroded a lot of those resistances that existed before. I think with the generations younger than me in Vancouver and Toronto and Montreal there’s much more of an immediate sense of contemporaneity with poets in San Francisco and New York. I think that’s much more possible now than it was in the past. But I do regret, since the topic is coming up, that Canadian poetry remains so esoteric within American poetry culture.

RM: Last question, was there a resonance south of the border for later generations?

CB: Vancouver remains one of the places in which the work of a couple of branches of the New American Poetry got presented, so it is a part of that history.

RM: Linda Wagner-Martin said “the network grew ...”

CB: The material that was presented at that conference was not dramatically different than that presented in San Francisco or New York and was, for the most part, not dependent on the conference taking place in Vancouver. We didn't need this conference for American poetry. What we do need is a history of a conversation between American and Canadian poetry and poetics. And that is undone business.

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