

Call Me Ipsissimus: Charles Olson in Jonathan Bayliss's *Gloucesterbook*.

By Stephen Farrell

Charles Olson presided over an artistic circle in Gloucester that included now-familiar literary figures like Peter Anastas and Vincent Ferrini. However, one name associated with Olson's coterie that is only mentioned in passing is that of Jonathan Bayliss. This little-known author was a frequent visitor to Olson's house at 28 Fort Square after the poet's return to Gloucester in the late Fifties, and was involved in the all-night whiskey-fueled colloquies therein that have become the stuff of literary legend. Bayliss's vast prose works owe an obvious debt to Olson's artistic ideals. He explores Olson's concept of "dromenon" both more comprehensively than any of the innovators in the Black Mountain College milieu who originally reframed it in a Modernist context, and more responsibly than those for whom it has assumed a typically vacuous New Age identity. It is not my intention here to discuss Bayliss's fiction (though I highly recommend it), but rather to share with those interested in Charles Olson a personal and intellectual appreciation of the poet by one who knew and respected him.

In 1992, Bayliss self-published his monumental debut novel *Gloucesterbook*, which explores the physical, artistic, economic, and genetic legacy of an East Coast American city. The region described in his fiction is a surreal version of Gloucester, viewed through a kaleidoscope that makes it appear alternately as sinister and comedic as a post-industrial Troy. Among the places and people given mythic disguises by Bayliss, the character of Dr. Ipsissimus Charlemagne is of particular interest to Olson aficionados. Hardly central to *Gloucesterbook*'s intricate plot, Charlemagne is essentially a device whereby the local system is first described. I hope to present Bayliss's poignant and humorous portrait of Olson without having to provide an exegesis for the entire novel.

Gloucesterbook takes place in 1960. Businessman Raphael Opsimath is traveling to Dogtown (Gloucester) to get information on a shadowy business his company is looking to acquire. His parallel assignment is to compose a thesis on the process for his graduate studies at White Quarry College (obviously Black Mountain, though that institution became defunct in 1957). Looming over his arrival in Dogtown is the prospect of a meeting with his mentor Dr. Charlemagne, who appears to have a dictatorial classroom presence when in session at White Quarry. Opsimath recalls:

I'm the only one who stands up to him, taking my lumps without a flinch. For all his charming camaraderie, I soon divined that it's an insolence to disagree with him unless your protests are couched in an appreciation of his own previous utterances or in the zeal to protect his line of thought. I save face by virtue of the fact that he's old enough to deserve customary respect. (p.17)

While in Dogtown, Opsimath visits Charlemagne's tenement in Leviathan Court (Fort Square, renamed in honor of Olson's fixation with *Moby-Dick*) bearing two whiskey bottles. As was Olson's custom, Charlemagne rises in the late afternoon:

After slowly responding to several knockings it took Charlemagne a few seconds through his bifocals to identify the visitor; but he showed no surprise. Rafe was glad that the two bottles remained intact. Pointing to the bag he said “Whenever you have the time: one for you, one for the two of us. I was afraid they were going to be confiscated on the way in.”

“Did Mrs. LaPlace harass you?” Bent to peer at his student he finally smiled. “If you stay more than ten minutes she’ll know you’re okay by me and next time she won’t bother you. I’m under her protection. She thinks professors need peace and quiet.”

“Is she the one that named you Doc?”

“It’s a waggish city. I suppose you’re in town on Yahoo business?”

“Right now I’m here to take you out to dinner, if it’s not too late for you to change your plans.”

“Never mind plans. I just finished breakfast.” (p. 69-70)

By the fall of 1960, Olson would have lived in Gloucester for three years. It seems Charlemagne’s literary den has long since become Ground Zero for Dogtown’s literati, even though his reputation has yet to extend beyond Cape Gloucester (Cape Ann). Bayliss eulogizes Olson with great admiration:

The student soon understood that Ipsissimus demanded yet more attention in his own motte than at large in other places. But how far from this citadel of symposium were the outer walls? How great the real extent of his barony? Certainly his authority as magus was bound by no less a circle than the equator, though acknowledged only by the few who appreciated the autonomous learning with which the sage conflated confounded and subsumed the categories of art and science; but as for the blooming and buzzing of the exoteric world, was he recognized as an actual lord even in the bailey of Leviathan Court? (p.70)

Elsewhere in *Gloucesterbook*, two of Doc’s acolytes leave his inner sanctum after a less intense night of “Languedoc” than usual. Bayliss’s humorous description leaves no doubt as to the intellectual fortitude that must have been necessary to keep company with Olson at Fort Square during his homilies concerning poetry, mythology, and Communism as well as his rants against popular culture. Most of the targets of his wrath are fairly simple to identify even in Bayliss’s disguises, but “DV” refers to “devilvision” or Charlemagne’s reviled television:

There’d been no talk for instance about dromenological matters in the Charlomagian repertory, and scarcely anything about the Resistance or its oppressors: no mention of the “cathode ray sugar cone” (CRSC), Idol of the Hearth and opiate of all classes; or the epidemic narcosis of Kako-Koma and Sucro-Soma (viciously introduced and inflamed by advertising, the same immunosuppressive disease that DV had acquired from Atlantean whorehouses before its conception); not a word about sentimental Uncle Sugar patriotism; nor about the saccharine epicenity of a nouveau bourgeoisie ruled by the nidification instinct and nurtured on ersatz folklore invented yesterday in the inanely fantastic

panantics of Hanky Panky the Monkey picturesquely stereotyped by the bulbous blue nose of a buffoon; nor yet about the slurry of sucrose melos in which all other stories were dulcerated and slurped; nor even about “the popular muse of copycatting”, as “the performing art of selection by anyone possessing an aperture....” They had long since agreed with Doc on all these matters. (p. 373, ellipsis in original)

There is only one indicator of the outside world’s interest in Charlemagne’s work, but a significant one: famed author Jock Merrimac has paid a recent visit to the Doctor’s lair. This is Jack Kerouac, renamed after the river running through his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts:

[T]he narrator of “present-day national epic,” Jock Merrimac, whose celebrations of places from coast to coast were admired even by Doc as “original passions not yet dissolved in sugar soup by the amplified rhapsodes,” had come crawling in alcoholic stupor to pay his tribute to the artist of dromenon. The younger of the two luminaries (and much the more famous) had become the first to yield to the magnanimous impulses that eventually or occasionally override the dignified reserve of worthily lionized sovereigns.

Of course the erstwhile athlete and poetic champion of the Beaus [Beats] could the more easily afford to be gracious, inasmuch as he enjoyed national success with a notoriously rising generation, the formation of whose emotions and opinions suffered little drag from the inertia of study. Yet on the other hand, leading a dissipated and dangerous life, Merrimac probably believed himself the closer to death. (p. 376)

Kerouac didn’t actually visit Olson in Gloucester until 1968, when he was indeed a year away from death. Bayliss doesn’t describe the summit itself, but his portrait of Kerouac and the Beats is far from flattering. Certainly Olson influenced Kerouac, but I’ve never heard what he thought of the younger writer’s work. Charlemagne considers Merrimac’s “lyric verse” cycle *Professor Hex* (obviously *Doctor Sax*, though a prose work) his masterpiece. Perhaps Olson scholars could clarify whether this is an accurate representation of his attitude toward the more celebrated Massachusetts writer:

Unbeknownst even to the cognoscenti, Doc had acclaimed *Professor Hex* as the Ur-type of the “Quantum writing” that he himself had been prophesying. (p. 377)

At Leviathan Court after the traveler’s arrival, Opsimath and Charlemagne discuss local gossip over whiskey, eventually mentioning the imminent Presidential election. Charlemagne claims to have gone to Norumbega University (Harvard) with Kennedy. Though both are New Deal Democrats who support Kennedy, there may be some envy of the privileged ‘Irish Roosevelts’ in this typical Charlemagne *bon mot*:

“For a Kennedy education was nothing but the most noncommittal way to further general ambition.” (p. 72)

More regional gossip ensues, and Charlemagne needs to explain the disparaging term ‘needle trades’ to Opsimath. The needle is the flat shuttle used by fishermen to mend their nets, representing the past that Dogtown is selling to tourists for a seasonal pittance. This netting needle is a recurring metaphor in *Gloucesterbook*, as a once-useful device that has become a meaningless symbol of extinct industry. Bayliss is merciless in his criticism of a tourist-based economy, and the term ‘pilgrim’ is used to ridicule holidaymakers and their pursuit of leisure. Any attempt to sentimentalize the way capitalism has left Dogtown a parody of its former glory rankles Charlemagne, and the entrepreneur Opsimath has to bear the brunt of his rage. The starving Rafe persuades Charlemagne to accompany him to dinner:

Doc hoisted to his back a gray tweed overcoat with splitted seams, knotting the arms around his neck. It was a warm night, Rafe remarked. “The weather has nothing to do with it.” said the big man with one of his charming unexpected grins that always flattered the heart of a companion. “It’s my cloak of respectability, for going downtown. In your honor.” Spreading his palm on the breast of his undarned purple cardigan he made a leg with soft-shuffled ankle-high gunboats, bowing politely, took a stuffed brown paper bag from beneath the sink, and led Rafe out the dark back door. (p. 77)

After dumping his trash over the sea wall, Charlemagne stops into Pound’s Drug Store (probably Pierce’s, but renamed for another of Olson’s idols) for a newspaper:

Into Pound’s quick as a wink ducked the honorary Doctor, courteously furtive, a fish skipping out of water, coins ready in hand for a fast transaction, to snatch a copy of the *Dogtown Daily Nous* [sic] only to roll it up without inspection and carry it as a baton on the rest of their way, sometimes tapping his own chest and thigh, or Rafe’s head and shoulder, and extending the sweep of other gestures. “My dessert.” he explained. “My midnight entertainment, the quotidian resolution of civic uncertainty and renewal of suspense, the herald of local surprises. Dogtown’s weekday letter to yours truly. On Sunday I have to use the *New Uruk Testament* [New York Times], but its coverage of Dogtown ain’t what it should be.” (p. 81)

The Gloucester *Daily Times* is the paper to which Olson wrote his incendiary letters during the Sixties. These concerned international subjects as well as local environmental and housing issues, and were later edited into a volume by Peter Anastas. A walk past downtown’s 19th-century architecture produces a glorious rant from Charlemagne that must echo one of Olson’s published tirades:

“These are the ones they’re keenest to tear down. They love to fill up the coves with bricks and slabs like these; they say it’s just what’s needed for the best construction footing. These buildings were put up by housewrights trained in making schooners who knew how to improve all the curves and angles of shoreline lots with Federalist simplicity. In those days water frontage was too

precious to waste on stables: their kitchen gardens went for ship stalls; spars and cooperage were kept in their backyards. But now even this unpolished gem”— Doc patted the curve of the granite they were passing—“offends the Earldermen because its upstairs windows are broken and the landlord won’t keep it in repair otherwise either. It seems that the pilgrims turn up their noses at this end of the street, and that frightens the merchants up there.” His thumb jerked toward the business establishments they had passed on higher ground, from which this Tuscan West End was hidden by no more than the littoral twist instituted by a colonial footpath.

He waved at the storefronts. “Naturally these Etruscans don’t give a damn what Dogtown used to look like. They always build their nests from the inside anyway. They care about their cooking equipment—most of them have two kitchens—and their furniture; and cars of course; but they don’t have the Yankee obsession with neat and clean externality. They came here for the fishing, by God, and for each other! Better the Europeans mess up lower Front Street by making it a neighborhood, after nobody else saw the good of it anymore, than have it disinfected of life and modernized for the needle trade! Mess and stench has always been Dogtown’s best defense against the land-sharks—and against the goo-goos too—who haven’t yet discovered what’s under the shambles. God bless our dirt! Preserve our politics!”

Doctor Charlemagne wheeled to address not only Raphael Opsimath but also the entire bourgeoisie of the upper city, thumbing a nose elongated by the rolled newspaper, a magnified lightly fantastic faun too old to prance very lively. “Reformers, beware! Belletrists, go away! Enlightened businessmen, invest your loans someplace else!” (p. 81-82)

The pair finally reach the Windmill, a restaurant Charlemagne frequents at late hours. The staff is obviously used to the demanding guest.

“Sir, the kitchen wants to close soon.” the waitress timidly apologized, after Doc had made a big fuss about being asked for his dinner order before he’d had a couple of rounds of the same stuff they’d been drinking in his kitchen (only at five times the cost per ounce to Rafe). As the big customer beetled at her she made it worse by hastily adding “It’s slower tonight than usual. You’re the last one left.” She was so possessed by fear of Doc that her attention and her second-person pronouns were singular, as if she addressed the parent of a mute.

“You’re always pulling that one on me, sister! —What does your watch say, Mr. Opsimath?—It’s still forty minutes to the advertised closing time. The cook can’t object to staying on the job. I wonder if Busty knows how you treat his best patron.” (p. 86)

After drinking more liquor and discussing Sterne, the two diners are served. The Doctor greets the delivery of his steak with an additional request for the two hapless waitresses:

“Seeing that we seem to be taxing the patience of this organization by showing up at all tonight, I’d better tell you ahead of time that I’ll be wanting another one.” With wagging eyebrows he challenged them impartially, the principal having willingly shared power and responsibility with her selfless auxiliary. “I want you to get home early to your boyfriends. All you’ve got to do is repeat my order, verbatim, the whole works. Can you still read the slip you wrote before? I’ll eat this one reasonably fast. Run and tell the cook right now, so he won’t hang up his apron until it’s quitting time, but don’t bring it so soon that it’ll get cold on me. And Happy New Year to him!” (p. 90)

Charlemagne reminisces about his tenure in the Roosevelt administration. Though Olson quit his post in protest over censorship, Doc still displays admiration for FDR and his deputy:

“Under Roosevelt our *res publica*’s were a national liturgy that took in many *urgies* of society, not just the waterworks and roads of ditch-diggers. Harry Hopkins was a genius of implementation, like General Marshall in the war, who may have learned from him. He wanted to employ all abilities for the sake of society itself—though of course the WPA always had to be justified in terms of jobs for the sake of wages, even when it hired accountants and engineers and lawyers and doctors of medicine and teachers of everything. All through the devastations of the Depression and desperations of the War he and FDR instinctively understood that civilization without culture is no society.” (p. 92)

The Doctor even claims to have met FDR on one occasion, having developed a scenario for a drama on Roosevelt’s life. The President reportedly vetoed the idea, fearing a Republican backlash:

Rafe tried to visualize Ipsissimus Cuchulain starring in that role at a White House command performance, under his own direction, paragon for a thousand others.

“I went so far as to ask the President if he had any tips to give me about the drama of his life. Naturally he was just waiting to laugh me out of court. ‘Nothing doing, young man!’ he says, roaring with goodwill and charming the shirt off my back. ‘Can you imagine what the Cans would do with the slightest whisper of a hint that a thing like that ever crossed the mind of one of my friends? THAT MAN is in trouble enough, thank you! What a job the cartoonists would do on me! Especially if they got wind of your interest in that Russian fellow [Meyerhold]. They already know I was an editor of the *Crimson*. FDR ORDERS RED TO STAGE CAMPAIGN BIOGRAPHY IN ALL WPA THEATERS! Not to mention what some of the local hams would do to me in the role, accidentally or on purpose! Do you think I want them to use Federal funds to lampoon me?’ ...He laughed all the while but he was serious enough when he turned to Harry and said ‘Find this precocious boy a better job, where he won’t be so dangerous, and swamp him with responsibility so he won’t have time to dream up any more social experiments. Meanwhile, if so much as a wild guess of this gets into even a

gossip column I'll fire you both and sic J Edgar Blacklist on all your loved ones.' He wasn't frowning though as he wheeled himself back to his desk." (p. 94)

Charlemagne's political career notwithstanding, he is forced to admit that he never registered to vote. The disillusion behind his revelation constitutes the only sign of vulnerability behind the Doctor's bombastic façade. Here Bayliss disguises Olson's Maximus persona as 'Antipater' as he laments the neglect of the poet's imagination and ideals:

Rafe's displeasure was nevertheless somewhat alleviated when he began to acknowledge that the private person Antipater might have a very good excuse for not registering to vote: to wit, the sorry reception accorded his doctrine by both sides of the aisle, by the floor of the house and by its balcony, by every rank and every file. (p. 108)

Finally getting to his newspaper, Charlemagne notes with surprise the passing of local inventor/tycoon Prosper Ozone. Undoubtedly this is the eminent John Hays Hammond, Jr., "The Father of Radio Control," who lived in Gloucester until his death in 1965. Charlemagne has mixed feelings about Ozone's death: though Doc claims that Ozone contributed financial support to his publication *Dromenology*, Opsimath points out that Ozone's celebrated innovations led directly to the development of "devilvision":

"Holy Codfish!" The savant gave a whistle. "Wow." he confirmed in a level voice, gazing with noumenal thought into the face of his clever adjutant, who couldn't stop averting his eyes from the phenomenon of approbation. "I get you. It never occurred to me that Prosper Ozone might have been responsible for the sugar cone. I should have called him Father Phisto!"

There followed the longest silence Rafe had ever known his tutor to let fall, who had taken up his knife and fork again; the hands that held them rested on the tablecloth, but the eyes on a space beyond the heaping plate. Once or twice while still solemnly abstracted he opened his mouth again as if in underwater reverie. Suddenly he looked at Rafe and grinned. "I've been a spy in the house of Dis! A double agent without knowing it! Almost a collaborator, as a matter of fact, my accepting all those invitations to the Chateau!" (p. 106)

The subject of Hammond's patronage is an interesting one. His castle is now a museum in Gloucester, and certainly he was a collector of antiquities. However, his interest in modern art or poetry is unknown. It's possible that Olson benefited from Hammond's largesse: he didn't publish a periodical during these years, but in 1960 he gave a reading at Hammond Castle. Charlemagne seems to have been counting on Ozone's support for substantial projects:

"I once had hopes. In spite of his dilettante Neognosticism I thought he might stake me to a school of Dromenology and get Dogtown College going." (p. 100)

When the meal is finally finished, Opsimath decides to send Charlemagne home in a cab. Evidently he dreads the prospect of returning to Leviathan Court for more late-night philosophizing. Dr. Ipsissimus Charlemagne essentially disappears from the story after this one lengthy chapter in Bayliss's vast novel, but his ideas are active throughout. Some in Dogtown refer to him as the Director of the local system. It's no coincidence that Bayliss leaves his old friend Olson expounding upon a sea serpent that haunted Gloucester in the days when democracy was young. Olson must have seemed just as baffling to the people of twentieth-century America:

As they waited for two or three minutes on the front steps for response to his call, the visitor again gazed down upon Serpentine Avenue, which Doc had just explained was named not for the musical instrument it resembled in overall shape or evoked by association with the parade space and bandstand of its magnified and straightened sector but for the famous observations made from its shoreline at a time when the first windmill was still new. Benjamin Franklin and other men of science had sent a delegation there to join the sober magistrates and notaries of Dogtown in successfully waiting upon further appearance of the Atlantic sea serpent, which in those days seemed to be hailing this harbor as its home port. (p. 109)

(All references are to *Gloucesterbook* by Jonathan Bayliss, Protean Press 1992.)